Isaac ASIMOV's SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 1982 $1.50

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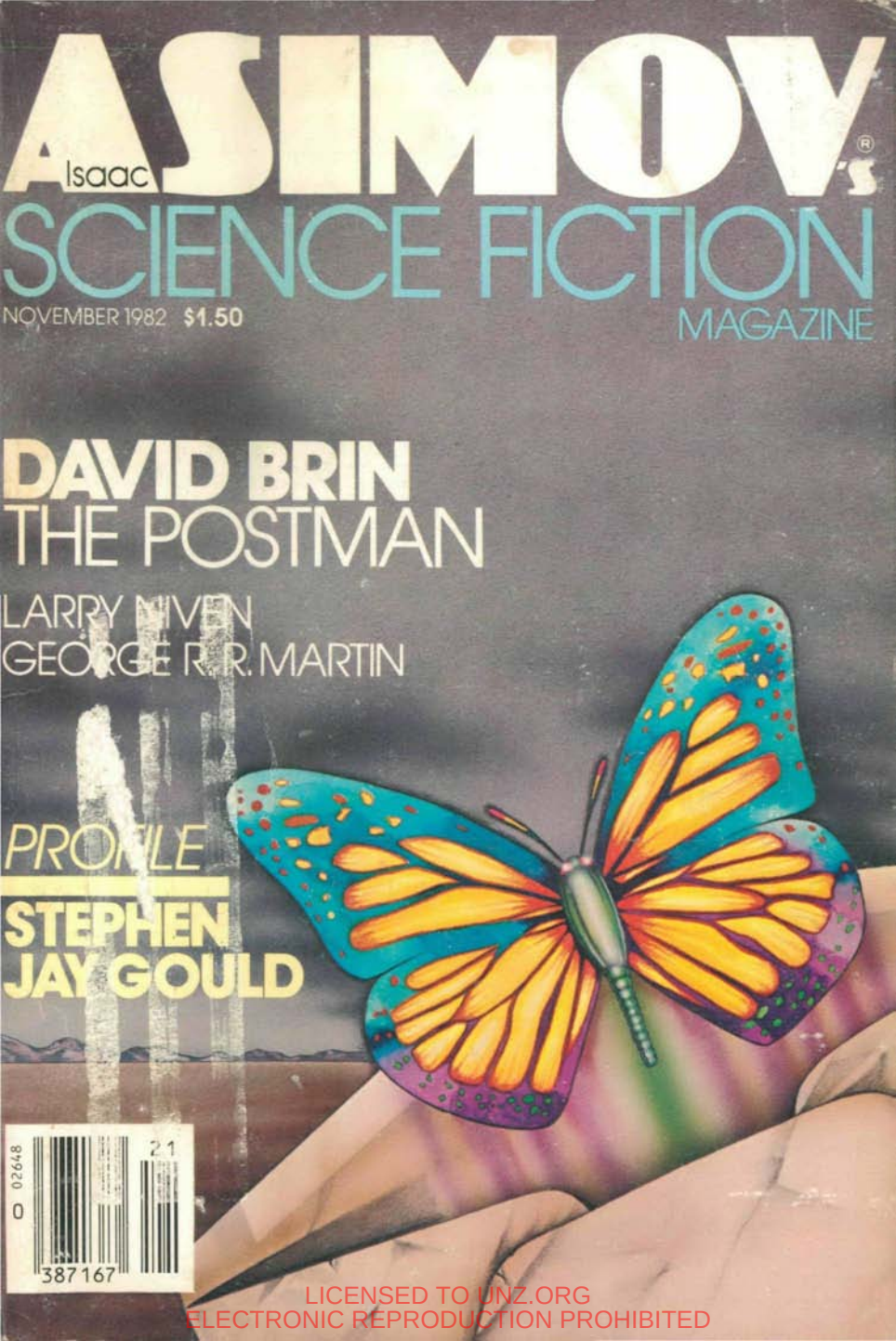
THE POSTMAN

LARRY NIVEN
GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

PROFILE
STEPHEN JAY GOULD



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Isaac Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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UP FRONT

by Kathleen Moloney

I like to use this space to call your attention to stories and articles I'm particularly enthusiastic about, but this month I'm finding it especially difficult to decide where to stop. There are truly excellent examples of all sorts of SF in this issue, from "The Postman," an extraordinarily powerful novella by David Brin, to "The Devil at the Door," a wonderfully silly story by Steve Vance. (Mr. Vance starts things off with what I think is an irresistible first sentence: "As soon as my older son asked if he could use his brother or sister for a human sacrifice, I realized that my quiet afternoon in the den might be threatened by the minor emergencies that only children can construct.")

And then we have short but very memorable contributions by two of the finest SF writers around, Larry Niven and George R. R. Martin. Lately they've both been spending most of their time writing memorable novels, but they still write some stories, which makes us very happy.

Space prohibits my talking about every story, but I will mention two others. Since many readers wrote in to praise Madeleine Robins's "The Boarder," in the July 1982 issue of *IAsfm*, I want to be sure you pay attention to her new story, "Lioncel," which is completely different but equally impressive. And Shawna McCarthy would never forgive me if I didn't mention Richard Bowker's "Grace." Shawna was the first person here to read the story, and when she passed the manuscript to me, she attached a note that said, "Wonderful story. Very moving. Let's *buy* it." She was right: it is, and we did.

Finally, we asked Tappan King to track down Stephen Jay Gould, author of *The Panda's Thumb* and *The Mismeasure of Man*, and ask him to agree to be the subject of a Profile. The results of their meeting proved to be fascinating, and we are particularly pleased to share Dr. Gould's thoughts with you.

As I said at the beginning, there's a lot here. But then you don't have to choose from among the stories and features. You can read them all, and I hope you will.

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EDITORIAL

COLLECTING

by Isaac Asimov

I started reading science fiction through the fortunate circumstance of my father's possession of a candy store, which included, among its appurtenances, a magazine rack.

This was fortunate for two reasons. First, it meant that science fiction magazines were physically available to me. The instant they came I could grab my copy. I was in no danger of missing any. Second, those copies did not cost me a penny. I read each issue from cover to cover, with the most intense concentration, but held it very lightly so as not to distort its binding, wrinkle its cover, or fingerprint its pages. When I was done, it still looked like new, and it could be put on the magazine rack for possible sale.

This made me unhappy at the time, for I desperately wanted to keep the issues, but my father absolutely forbade that. It might be sold, and we needed every penny that every sale could bring us. And if it weren't sold, we could return it.

Looking back on those days, I am more than a little uncomfortable over the realization that I contributed nothing to the survival of the science fiction magazines; that I took, in fact, a free ride at the expense of those who did pay for them.

Yet what could I do? Had I not been able to read the magazines without charge, I could not have read them at all; that's how tight money was. Buying them would have been impossible. I tell myself, however, that my freeloading in those days of my childhood led to my involvement in science fiction and that what I have contributed to the field since has made up for that early period of sinning.

As I grew older, however, I rebelled more and more against the necessity of returning science fiction magazines to the rack—particularly in the case of *Astounding*. I laid siege to my parents, offered to barter extra work in the candy store for the privilege, and so on. The golden day finally came when I received permission and was even given a special little closet in which I could keep my issues.

I was sixteen at the time, and

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after a few months I was able to stand back and stare at several different issues of science fiction magazines which were mine—mine! I had been bitten by the collecting bug.

Predictably, I began to shop about for back numbers so I could regain the issues I had been forced to give up in the past. My collection grew, and, at its peak, in the early 1940s, my proudest possession was a complete set of *Unknown*.

I was never to reach the ultimate, however. I was never to achieve the dizzying rank of a "completist." There are enthusiasts who attempt to buy a copy of every magazine, every book, every paperback that is published in the field of science fiction. Of these, Forrest J. Ackerman is the most extreme. He was not only a science fiction completist; he also collected fantasy and horror and extended his interest into the field of comic books, movie posters, memorabilia of all sorts, and who knows what else.

The consequences in Forrie's case are exactly what you might expect. He filled his house — quite literally. He has a fairly large house, now, in which he does not live, in which he *cannot* live. It is filled in every room in every spot, top to bottom, wall to wall, with collected items of every kind. I would not be surprised if Forrie had the largest and most thoroughgoing collection of SF and SF-related material in the whole world.

He struggled to maintain this collection and to keep up with the ever-growing quantities of material spewed out by the printing presses, devoted all his assets and income to it, and has (I think) converted it into a museum. It is a tourist mecca and a believe-it-or-not item.

Needless to say, I never approached this, or one ten-thousandth of this. As the 1940s progressed, in fact, my collectomania receded from its very modest peak. I became more interested in my marriage, in getting my degrees, in getting a job, and, most of all, in my writing.

I finally decided that it was enough for me to collect only those issues of magazines with something of my own in them. I envisioned a day when I might have a whole bookcase of nothing but different science fiction magazines containing my stories.

I underestimated, of course. Magazines weren't all there were. There came books in various editions; anthologies in various editions; paperbacks. Room failed me. It took not a bookcase but serried ranks of them. Little by little, I had to give up. I couldn't save foreign editions. I couldn't save intact anthologies and magazines. I

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now save only English-language books and bound tearsheets, and even so I have run out of room.

Fortunately, beginning in 1966, Boston University—for reasons known only to itself—decided to collect my papers.

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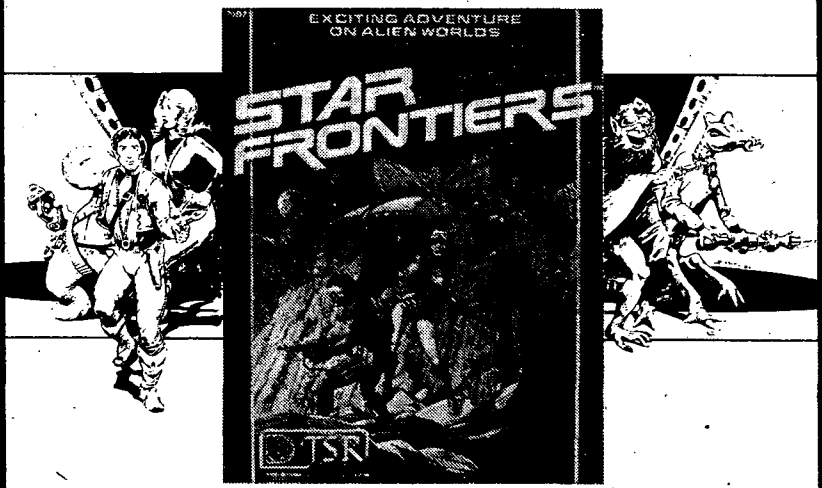

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It took them a while to convince me that they were serious, but since then I send them one copy of every edition of every book I do, plus every copy of every foreign language edition that I can get hold of. They also get galleys, manuscripts, first drafts, correspondence, fan mail, and so on. Periodically, I ask them if they have had enough, if they still have room. Always, they answer no and yes, respectively.

What's more, it has turned out that there are actually a few fan-collectors who specialize, as I do, just as devotedly and with less excuse. They, too, are Asimov-completists.

This is flattering, of course, but embarrassing. Consider the guilt I feel, when I think of young men (they're usually young men) cajoling their parents into (a) emptying their bookcases, so that copies upon copies of different books of mine can be piled into them and (b) emptying their pocketbooks, because these books cost money.

The one who is the epitome of such completists is a Mr. Robert Esposito, whom I have had to dub my #1 fan. He is absolutely intent on getting every single one of my books, fiction, nonfiction, and anthologies. He is in touch with me periodically to make sure that not one of my books gets past him. He has me list the latest by number, and he recently told me, with considerable pride, that, for his birthday, his parents presented him with a set of the three Foundation books in their first editions and in good condition.

"Good heavens," I said, "those are liable to cost more than fifty dollars apiece."

"Well," he said, "they were a birthday present."

I've talked to his mother to make sure he wasn't running them into the ground (I have to sleep nights, you know), and she assured me that she was completely on his side. In fact, *she* sometimes calls me to check on items.

Yet there is an aspect of this sort of completism that makes me particularly uneasy.

Let me explain—

Back on November 6, 1968, I lectured to a group of librarians in Foxboro, Massachusetts. I remember the occasion because it was the day after Nixon's election to his first term, and I badly needed something to cheer me up—and librarians do the trick. But what I remember most of all was an incident toward the end of the session.

A librarian arose, and I readied myself for what I thought would be a question—but it wasn't. It was a comment.

"Dr. Asimov," she said, "I don't know what it means, but at our branch library, your books are the most frequently stolen."

I can't possibly believe that my readers are drawn from a

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particularly antisocial portion of the public. It can only be that they like my books so much that they can't force themselves to return them to the library.

I might chalk it up to anomalous behavior at one particular library, were it not that I get repeated comments of that sort. Most recently, I received a letter dated January 12, 1982, and addressed to this magazine, which said, in part, "I wish, from my viewpoint, you weren't such a popular writer. I just finished part of our inventory in the school library, and most of your books have been stolen!"

And if that is not enough, I have personal evidence. My dear wife, Janet, is very fond (as am I) of a resort hotel we frequently visit, and she takes with her, at every visit, a load of books of various kinds for its library, including various copies of mine. Periodically, we check the library, hoping that our books are used. And indeed they are—all except mine. Mine are stolen.

So I wonder if I could make a plea. Readers, I appreciate the compliment, but please don't steal my books. *Buy* them or borrow them from your library and *return* them. Not only is that the honest and respectable thing to do; it's the buying that keeps publishers—and me—in business. ●

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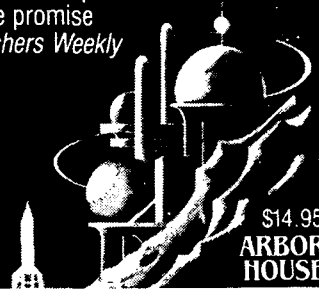

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Voyage from Yesteryear
By James P. Hogan
Del Rey Books, $2.95 (paper)

James P. Hogan has achieved quite a following in a writing career that is of relatively short duration (so short that he's not included in any of my most recent reference books). In that short time, however, he has produced seven novels, including his latest, *Voyage from Yesteryear*. His popularity is easy to understand; his works are a mixture of high-tech and social extrapolation, solidly integrated into a story line that arises from those elements. In other words, he writes classic science fiction.

This most recent novel is of a piece with the others. It opens on one of those huge live-in space vessels that provides comfortable facilities for a society of 30,000 people. It's a very organized society, set out from the United States of the New Order on Earth to colonize Chiron, a planet of Alpha Centauri. They have been en route for 30 years, and as it turns out, getting there is more than half the fun for a good number of those involved.

Here's the gimmick: Chiron has already been colonized by a ship from Earth. This was before the catastrophic war that has reduced America to rubble; its economic and social recovery transformed it into a superpatriotic, totalitarian state.

Those initial colonists to Chiron were all born there, transported as human genetic information in electronic form. The only "older generation" consisted of robots. There has been communication with this developing society since, but the new colonists have no clear picture of what it is like and tend to think of the original settlers as children, though it has been fifty years since they settled, and they are well into a third generation. But they will be educated to the "New Order."

The story, of course, tells what happens when the two societies meet. It is, in a sense, a familiar one: what has developed on Chiron is something of a Utopia, and what we have is a simple, flexible society seducing a complex, rigid one. The idea goes at least as far back as those romantic stories of Eu-

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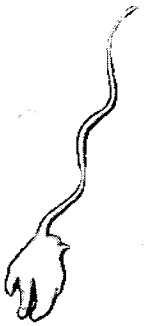

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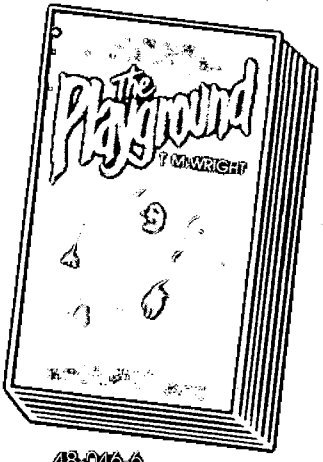

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ropean cultures confronting the Polynesian, and there have been numerous examples in SF (those by Sturgeon and Russell come immediately to mind).

This is not to imply a lack of originality. Hogan has created an ideal society that is anarchistic, (mostly) pacific, and based on two important factors: almost no past and almost limitless resources supplied by the advanced technology with which they came equipped. It seems viable and should provide endless fuel for argument as to its workability.

My major reservation about *Voyage from Yesteryear* is with the multitudinous characters. Hogan comes a bit close to social satire here, since they all, despite valiant attempts at individualization, pretty obviously reflect the various sides: the up-tight Earth types, the laid-back Chironians, and those from Earth who will succumb to Chiron's charms.

Aside from that, there's not much to fault. It's a good story, clearly told and intelligently based, with enough action and intrigue to keep it moving right along through its considerable length. Classic—and classy—science fiction indeed.

Eyas
By Crawford Kilian
Bantam Books, $2.50 (paper)

The critic—or at least *this* critic—approaches the book by an unfamiliar author with some apprehension. Will it turn out to be one of those unreadable messes that are agony to plow through? (One of the most difficult things in the world is reading, thoroughly and with comprehension, something that you don't want to read—try it sometime.)

This happens enough to pose a threat; more common is the perfectly readable book of varying quality that one can at least cope with. And the exception is that book that, after a certain number of pages (usually not that many), picks you up, carries you along, and all but shouts, "This is something special." Crawford Kilian's *Eyas* is that sort of book.

In form, *Eyas* is a book that begins on a small scale and grows to the cosmic—difficult to do but so satisfying when done right. The novel opens on an unnamed world in which the life forms are a mixture of the known and the unfamiliar. The inhabitants, who call themselves the People, are reminiscent of the Indians of the American Northwest. Until a couple of hundred years ago, they had been enslaved by a more technically advanced society, the Suns. But eventually the people had revolted and maintained their independence ever since.

By chance, a Sun infant falls into the hands of a family of the

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People; they name him Eyas and raise him as one of their own. When the Suns invade the land of the People to reconquer it, Eyas flees and forms a coalition of the other intelligent beings of this world (usually barely tolerant of one another at best): the centaurs, the winged windwalkers, the nomad Bands of the Yellow Desert, the feline lotors, and the Riverines.

This aspect of *Eyas* is solid, if not startlingly original, material, raised to the absorbing by extraordinarily able handling. The various cultures *are* original, idiosyncratic, and believable. The large proportion of the story devoted to Eyas's upbringing among the People could well have been pedestrian, but thanks to the author's creative detailing of the culture and continuous inventiveness in character and event, it is not. The maneuvering and multiple battles of the later section are unrepetitious for much the same reasons.

Throughout all this, however, there have been mysteries. There is the Goddess of the People, who seems to be an intelligent, telepathic whale. The dead haunt the dreams and influence the minds of Eyas and others. Who are the creatures called Messengers, seemingly ordinary persons suddenly possessed of terrifying voices and frightening powers? And in the sky is a glowing arc, the Bridge of Heaven, and the luminous disc called Skyland.

These are not merely ornamental details, and their explanation moves the narrative into an entirely different level. And nothing in the world could make me spoil any surprises in this review.

There are difficulties here and there in the story, rough edges in spots, and in the section devoted to battles and strategy, a few too many characters, races, and places to be kept track of. The resolution is almost too speedy; while there are no loose ends, more time could have been spent on the revelations of the climax. In other words, it could have been longer—and there are precious few novels I have ever said *that* about.

The Time of the Dark
By Barbara Hambly
Del Rey Books, $2.50 (paper)

Despite being saddled with an unfortunate title and a misleading, if charming, cover, Barbara Hambly's first novel is a propitious one. Though it has its share of heroics and horrors, it has an odd sweetness (in the best sense), a quality rare in adult fantasy.

The Time of the Dark is an unfortunate title, because it's one of those blah, unmemorable, and slightly pretentious combinations of words, easily

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confused with Tim Powers's *The Drawing of the Dark* of some years ago, and Susan Cooper's near-classic *The Dark Is Rising*. The cover is wonderful in its way, depicting a classic wizard, complete with cowl, sword, and staff, seated at an epitomal Sears dinette in a cluttered modern kitchen and clutching a brand-name can of beer. Though it accurately depicts a scene from the book, the picture is humorous, implying a lighter work than the book actually is.

Gil, who is working on her Ph.D., and Rudy, a semi-tough painter of sunsets on cars, find themselves in an alternate world through a peculiar series of circumstances, there to act as fairly unwilling aides to the wizard Ingold. Ingold had taken brief refuge in our world, temporarily congruent with his, and has more or less accidentally brought Gil and Rudy back with him.

Ingold's world is basically like our own, but the differences are many. Magic works, and wizards have uneasy acceptance in the affairs of the medieval culture that has dominated for thousands of years. This culture, however, is in its death throes due to an invasion by the Dark, a horde of mysterious and vicious creatures, intelligent in a way alien to humans, who wield powers both physical and magical.

The Time of the Dark reflects the influence of an unlikely pairing of Tolkien and Lovecraft (at one point Gil refers to the Dark as "Lovecraftian," realistically but maybe unfortunately), but there's a good deal of originality present, too. Gil and Rudy are nicely drawn, disaffected, contemporary young people whom one likes. It is a pleasure to see them finding their places and abilities in this strange world as they accompany Ingold and a last pathetic band of refugees toward an ancient Keep where safety from the Dark might be found. The wizard, too, is nicely characterized: superhumanly wise, unpredictable but kind, stretched to the limit by the crisis of the moment.

The novel comes to a demi-climax, but there is obviously a sequel to follow. Let's hope Hambly maintains the quality she has so neatly established in this one.

Darkworld Detective
By J. Michael Reaves
Bantam, $2.50 (paper)

The private eye sits in his dusty office. Business is, of course, bad; the usual grubby outer garment hangs behind the door; the usual weapon is currently being used for a paperweight. A call comes through; it's a woman wanting to engage his services. She sounds beautiful. She arrives. She *is* beau-

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tiful. Suddenly, out of thin air, she pulls a demon on him. . . .

A demon? Not to mention that the usual garment is a trenchcloak, the weapon is a sword, and the call comes through on a phonecub, a small living creature with two tails.

J. Michael Reaves, in *Darkworld Detective*, has attempted to set the classic private detective story into a complicated future milieu. So far as I can judge (my detective-fiction reading tends more toward the Wimsey-cal), he has more or less succeeded, with a problem or two unsolved.

One of those is that future setting, which attempts to mix space-faring SF and the magical-supernatural—always a tricky matter. Ja-Lur, the Darkworld,* is tangential to our physical universe and the universe of Darkness, another cosmos entirely where matter is influenced by will power and ritual—spells, in other words. The Unity of Planets has established a spaceport on Ja-Lur; human technology works there but not elsewhere on the planet, and Darkworld magic does not work in the spaceport. This gets pretty complicated and is more arbitrary than convincing.

Kamus of Kadizar is a Darkworlder, as well as a half-breed Darklander, which means he has some talent for magic but can never be sure when a spell might backfire. After some time on Earth on a cultural exchange program, he had decided to return to Ja-Lur to become its first—and so far only—private detective. He seems even more prone than most of his kind to getting himself involved in messy situations and is forever dashing off to the local equivalent of the wrong side of the tracks to be hit over the head or arrested by the Darkworld constabulary.

The four sections of the book are for the most part independent "cases" and are set in the familiar pattern of involvement in clients' affairs. This includes the murder of various characters seemingly uninvolved in the matter at hand, and a solution that is a long way from where we started out. The sections, incidentally, are titled "The Big Spell," "The Maltese Vulcan," "Murder on the Galactic Express," and "The Man with the Golden Raygun."

Chandler fans who like SF or SF readers who like Chandler will get a kick out of it.

The Last Incantation
By Clark Ashton Smith
Timescape, $2.95 (paper),

Here is a new collection of old stories, and something of a spe-

Maybe we could just retire the word "dark" and its derivatives and combined forms for a decade or so—see comments on The Time of the Dark *preceding.*

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cial event. Clark Ashton Smith was one of the seminal influences of modern American fantasy; he, Lovecraft, and Howard were the "Three Musketeers of Weird Tales."

Smith was the oddest of an odd lot. His output was limited to short stories (just about a hundred of them), but his creative energy was really devoted to poetry and sculpture. His stories of demons and sorcerers have been out of style and out of print for quite a while now. Finally, last year, a collection appeared in paperback (*The City of the Singing Flame*), and now there's another, *The Last Incantation*.

His work relies heavily on its elaborate prose, which is certainly a little purple around the edges, and many of the stories are little more than anecdotes. This most recent collection contains stories from the cycles of Atlantis and Hyperboria, lost worlds of prehistory; Averoigne, in 14th-century France; and even a couple on a highly unscientific (even for Smith's time) Mars.

Though the stories are certainly not to everyone's taste, it's good to have more of Smith's work again available for those to whose taste it is.

The Big Time
By Fritz Leiber
Ace, $2.25 (paper)

Fritz Leiber's towering masterpiece is back in print. It should never have been out; I can think of no other work of comparable stature in the field that has been allowed to languish in limbo for such a period.

The Big Time is an extraordinary concept extraordinarily executed. "Being on the Big Time" is being involved in the Change War, a war fought through all time and space by the Snakes and the Spiders. The primary tactic in the Change War is exactly that — change: the changing of reality in a way favorable to one side or the other. All of history is, therefore, in a state of flux, which we ordinary mortals —"Zombies"—know nothing about, since our perceptions and memories change also.

Certain humans and other intelligent beings are drawn out of this to serve as soldiers and other functionaries; they are on the Big Time.

That is the staggering premise. Just as amazing is how it is conveyed to the reader by Leiber. No epic novel, this; it's very short, barely above a novelette in length, and concerns only a few hours in the lives of a handful of people on the Big Time. They are Entertainers, employed in a place outside the cosmos that they simply call the Place, which is maintained as an R&R spot for Change War soldiers. It's a crowded few hours; there's action (an atomic

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bomb is activated), mystery (who stole the Major Maintainer that keeps the Place from imploding, and where did they put it?), and romance. But we never meet Snake or Spider, nor do we find out who or what they are, and we hear of the major action of the war only second hand.

But the vastness, confusion, and horror are conveyed as powerfully as any such alien situation ever has been in SF. It's quite a novel. (And, incidentally, it would make quite a movie or, better, teleplay, given its small scale.)

May *The Big Time* be with us a long time this time ●

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York NY 10014.

NEXT ISSUE

FOUNDATION'S EDGE!!

That's right—for being such loyal readers, for picking up *IAsfm* each month, come rain or shine, you're going to get an extra-special reward. Who among us doesn't know that Isaac Asimov has finally completed the fourth book in his justly famous Foundation "Trilogy"? And who among us hasn't wondered: "Is it as good as the first three? Does the Good Doctor hold up the tradition?" Well, we here at his magazine can answer those questions with an unequivocal "yes, yes." And in our December issue you'll have the chance to see for yourselves, because we'll be presenting to you, complete and unabridged, the first two chapters of this extraordinary novel. Not only that, but we'll also have an exclusive article by Dr. Asimov himself on the history of the entire Foundation series: how he came to write it, what he thought of it at the time, and how he was "forced" to write this fourth book. And that's not all! We'll also have commentary from such writers as Arthur C. Clarke, Harlan Ellison, Larry Niven, Harry Harrison, Frederik Pohl, Poul Anderson, Jack Williamson, Clifford Simak, and many more, on the Foundation Trilogy and how it shaped both science fiction and science fiction writers. Plus: Interior artwork by none other than Hugo-Award winning artist Vincent Di Fate. But don't think that we'll neglect to give you your requiste dose of *IAsfm* fiction: We'll have pieces from Pat Cadigan, Bob Shaw, and Jayge Carr, as well as our usual reviews, puzzles, and features. This issue is bound to become a collector's item. Pick yours up October 26, 1982.

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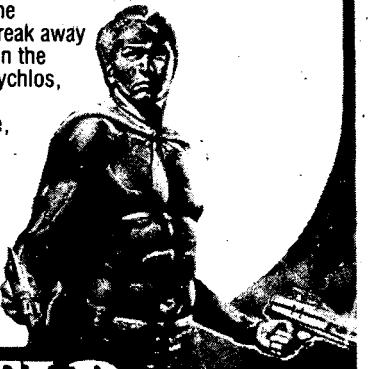

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IAsfm Puzzle #3 by Merl H. Reagle

SQUEEZE PLAY

ACROSS

1 The earth, in a way
5 Like Hotspur
9 Grating sound
13 Morlocks' meal
14 Detest
16 Golden Rule preposition
17 African lily
18 Gaucho's lariat
19 Bismarck's state: abbr.
20 Late actress Jayne
22 Fail to go off, as a gun
24 Mini revelations?
25 Bradbury's "R_____Rocket"
26 Riding money
29 "_____of Triumph," famed Norman Corwin broadcast about World War II
32 Immeasurably
33 Landing a_____the moon (JFK's dream)
35 Russian fighters
37 Like some verbs: abbr.
38 My_____, Vietnam
39 Quest in a Lucas/Spielberg film
40 Judy's girl
42 Leaning; lopsided
44 Nobel Prize winner who discovered deuterium
45 Requires
47 "For man is man, and master of_____"—Tennyson
49 Clark's love
50 Minderbinder in "Catch-22"
51 Puts on weight
54 Vampire film
58 Solo for Sills
59 Open-places phobia (comb.)
61 Stop up
62 Chevalier song
63 He starred in "The Terminal Man"
64 Actor Holliman
65 Cassandra was one
66 Laze
67 Dance, sort of

DOWN

1 Laser, for one
2 _____breve (2/2 time in music)
3 Doctorow's "_____Lake"
4 Places prone
5 Diamond, for one
6 Elie, Rudolf and Walter
7 Foodfish
8 Blazing
9 Flees
10 The King's followers?
11 Andre Norton's "_____Gate"
12 Emulate Moe
15 L.A. football aficionado
21 Comparative ending
23 Potent particle
25 One way to be boiled
26 Release money
27 German name meaning "wolf-ruler"
28 Milanese duke who was a patron of da Vinci
29 Walking_____
30 Jeweled headwear
31 Wading bird
34 Choir parts

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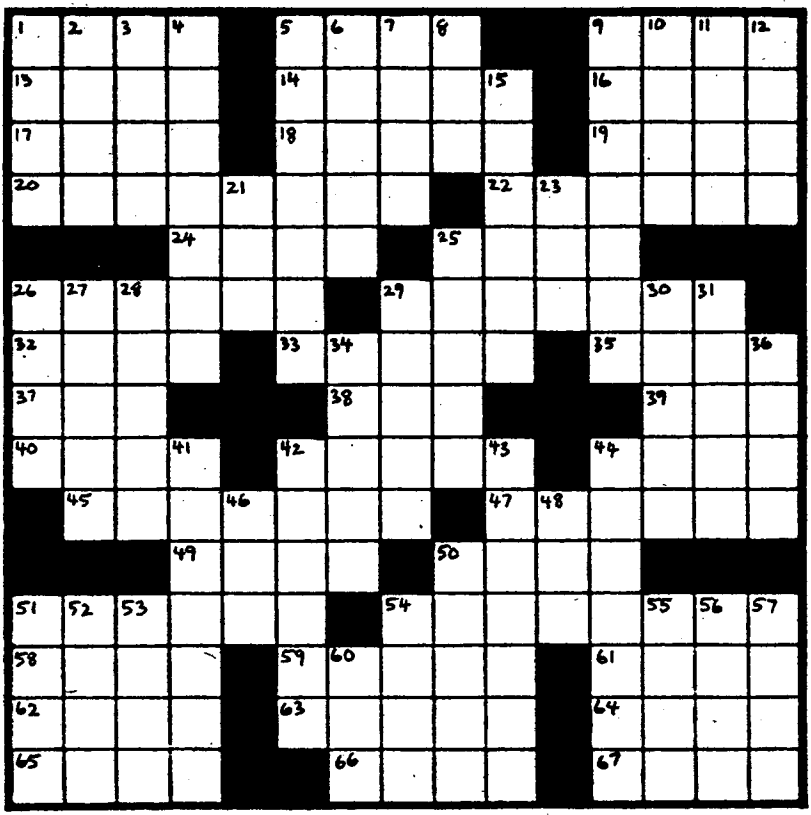
Solution on page 49

36 Type of terrier
41 Start of a quote about love and war
42 _____a fiddle
43 "Coming_____!" (TV-season phrase)
44 American troops
46 Mauna_____(volcano)
48 Island: Fr.
50 Ethical
51 Private eye's word for 24 Across
52 A Great Lake
53 Poul Anderson's "Fire_____"
54 Canceled
55 "There Oughta Be_____!"
56 One-third of a Pearl Harbor movie
57 Ogrelike
60 Semisolid stuff



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A Conversation with an (R)Evolutionary Scientist

PROFILE

STEPHEN JAY GOULD

by Tappan King

In 1972, about the same time that religious fundamentalists were mounting a renewed attack on Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, two young paleontologists, Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, were challenging it from within the sanctity of the scientific community. Eldredge and Gould proposed a radical revision to Darwin's model of evolution as a process of gradual, stately change. Their theory, called "punctuated equilibrium," assumes that new species develop in explosive bursts, virtually overnight in geologic terms.

Although Eldredge deserves the lion's share of the credit for the initial insight, it has

Photo: Wally McNamee/Newsweek

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been Gould's tireless and articulate defense of the proposition that has sparked the popular imagination and catapulted him into the kind of celebrity usually reserved for heads of state and music and film stars. (The week after this interview was concluded, Gould was the subject of a feature in *The New Yorker* and a cover story in *Newsweek*). And it's won him a reputation as a sort of scientific revolutionary, throwing theoretical bombs that blow up established dogmas.

While "revolutionary" is not a label Gould is particularly comfortable with, in many ways it's an apt one. At just over forty, Gould is acknowledged by even his

STEPHEN JAY GOULD ON
Science Fiction

"I think science fiction is most valuable for the working out of scientific ideas in a context that doesn't require the rigor of the scientific method. I've never been a keen student of science fiction; it never really caught me up—although I did spend one summer ripping through all of H.G. Wells. But I do think it's the appropriate place for the sort of scenarios and reconstructions that scientists are always being pressured to create to justify their theories.

I made this point in the introduction for Bjorn Kurten's *Dance of the Tiger* (Pantheon/Berkley), which is science fiction of a sort about the replacement some 30,000 years ago of the Neanderthal by modern man. Here was a wonderful book by one of the world's great evolutionary paleontologists, scrupulously accurate and exhaustively researched, based on a lifetime of work and an encyclopedic knowledge of the field. But the speculations that Kurten made in *Dance of the Tiger*, which were the proper function of fiction, would have been irresponsible if presented in the professional literature."

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sharpest critics as one of the most formidable iconoclastic thinkers in the field of evolutionary theory. He's drawn fire from the Moral Majority as a leading defender of evolution, most recently as a witness in the Little Rock, Arkansas, trial over teaching "scientific creation" in public schools; and from his own colleagues for his assaults on prevailing scientific dogma and his unorthodox methods of presentation.

Each semester, hundreds of students attend his seminars on the History of Life on Earth at Harvard, and hundreds of thousands more encounter his entertaining and extremely readable essays in a monthly column, "This View of Life," in *Natural History* magazine, or in a half-dozen published books, most recently, *The Panda's Thumb* and *The Mismeasure of Man.* This exposure, more than most diggers of bones and shells encounter in a lifetime, gives Gould a broad forum to express in a wide variety of contexts what may be his most radical theory of all: that science is a product of culture that reflects its values, and may be used to justify humanity's most objectionable activities, including racism, sexism, and war.

To find Stephen Jay Gould at Harvard, you must take the less-traveled paths, past ancient brick buildings marked with dates and names and weighted down with history, past the Harvard Divinity School and the Herbaria, to a massive building a mere century old—the Museum of Comparative Zoology. You enter, not through the quaint exhibit rooms with their stuffed specimens of lynx (*lynx rufus*), man (*homo sapiens*) and wombat (*vombatus ursinus*) but through a small back door marked "Staff Only," and go down narrow corridors blocked by small dinosaurs trapped forever in plaster.

At first glance, Gould's office is just what you'd expect of a Professor of Paleontology. It's lodged in a high-ceilinged room that was once an exhibit hall and still has the words SYNOPSIS OF THE ANIMAL KINGDOM, VERMES (worms) and PONGES AND PROTOZO on the walls in

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fading paint. But those walls are now almost hidden behind glass specimen cabinets, tables, desks, and a phalanx of ill-assorted bookcases crammed with the latest texts in crisp bindings, well-thumbed leather-bound editions of Darwin, Wallace, and Huxley, and old plastic coffee cups.

A closer look reveals touches of character. Amid the snail shells and bones and papers and pamphlets, there are at least three stuffed pandas, one nearly life-size, honoring Gould's acclaimed collection of essays, *The Panda's Thumb*. On a windowsill, near a copy of a journal called *Science for the People*, is a comic statuette of an ape regarding a human skull. It's crowned with a pair of Mickey Mouse ears: a reminder of a Gould column illustrating the principle of neotony (the retention of juvenile traits) by the successive changes Disney cartoonists made in the mouse to make him more appealing. On the end of one bookcase is a framed sheet of medieval music, and on another, a reproduction of a Soviet poster on which the most prominent word appears to be "revolution."

The office might serve as a model of Gould's mind: solidly grounded in history and tradition, rigorously disciplined and widely read, yet irreverent and witty. The contradictions are also apparent in Gould himself. His casual dress, scruffy beard, and shaggy mop of dark-brown hair now shot through with occasional strands of white, belie the sharp, skeptical twinkle in his eyes, the expression that is serious without being solemn.

The conversation begins at the beginning, with Gould's introduction to the world of evolutionary theory.

What made you decide to become a paleontologist?

"He did it," Gould answers, gesturing with a thumb at a huge, lush painting of a tyrannosaurus propped up against a row of cabinets. He grins. As it turns out, he's told this story three times in four days, to various members of the press.

"When I was five, my father

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took me for the first time to the Museum of Natural History in New York. I got one look at that magnificent skeleton of that quintessential carnivore, and I knew immediately what I wanted to be: a paleontologist. Before I could even pronounce it. Before that, I'd wanted to be a ball-player or a garbageman. But when I got a look at those bones, I was set for life."

Gould had a relatively normal childhood, growing up in Queens, playing stickball in the streets, going to Yankee games. He was largely self-taught in science.

"I had some good teachers at Jamaica High, but no one of them really set the fire under me. What the post-Sputnik generation forgets is that there was effectively no science being taught in high schools when we were growing up in the forties, to say nothing of evolution. You learned some science, of course, but there were no units on biology or astronomy or physics. I remember fondly one sixth-grade teacher who found herself with a classful of kids interested in science.

Photo: Wally McNamee/Newsweek

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She found a room for us to get together after school."

The Museum of Natural History, where Gould now has an office, became his school, his special place. He spent his winters in its labyrinthine corridors and his summers digging for fossils. An interest in progressive politics, acquired from his father, sent him to Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, a school with a long tradition of academic innovation and political activism.

"This was about the time that Sputnik went up, and the country was just getting interested in science again. I became active in civil rights. Even Yellow Springs, which was well north of the Mason-Dixon line, was a segregated town, with black barbershops and restrooms. I carried signs, demonstrated, the usual college thing."

Gould's impatience with racial prejudice informs much of his work, particularly *The Mismeasure of Man*, which won the 1981 National Book Critics Circle Award. After graduate work, divided between Columbia University and his old *alma mater*, the Museum of Natural History, he came to Harvard, where he began to specialize in the theoretical side of evolution.

"My involvement in evolutionary theory is fairly straightforward. It doesn't require a lot of deep psychological insight. I'd always had some difficulty with the dry, deductive business of paleontology, but I have a knack for basic principals. One of my greatest heroes as a kid (after Joe DiMaggio, of course) was a man named George Gaylord Simpson, who wrote a book called *The Meaning of Evolution*. Simpson was a curator at the Museum and a professor at Harvard and one of the great evolutionary theorists of our time. It was Simpson's work in how species develop that laid the groundwork for the theory of punctuated equilibrium that Niles Eldredge and I advocate."

How did you come to develop that theory?

"The great, unofficial, unwritten dogma of the day was that things happened gradually in evolution, that one species turned slowly into

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another over millions of years under the pressures of natural selection. Unfortunately, the fossil record didn't show that. What it recorded was long intervals of stasis when a species remained relatively unchanged. The argument of the gradualists was that the fossil record was incomplete. There simply wasn't enough evidence remaining to record all those gradual changes that created new species.

"Now, a century later, we have extensive, almost unbroken fossil histories, and the pattern is the same—long periods of stasis punctuated by rapid proliferation of new species. Still no sign of those transitional forms we were supposed to find. The gradualists look at those long unchanged periods and see nothing. For them, stasis doesn't count. Eldredge and I have a saying: 'Stasis-*is* data.' It describes the way we believe new species arise, rapidly, in only a few thousand years."

Does that mean you are believers in catastrophism?

"No. No, that's a different thing entirely. In strict terms, catastrophism is a geologic theory that says from time to time huge apocalypses have wiped out all or most of earth's species, and life had to start from scratch. There's little evidence for that kind of melodrama in the fossil record."

Don't you give any credence to the recent theory that the dinosaurs were wiped out by the aftereffects of a meteor or supernova?

"That can't be the whole explanation. When a system is strong and functioning, it takes more than a single event to wipe it out, no matter how catastrophic. If some extraterrestrial apocalypse did hit earth, it had its impact on a system that was already severely weakened. The most it might have done is to administer a final *coup de grace.*

Then what does cause the decline of some species and the rapid growth of others?

"All kinds of things. Reproductive pressures, change in food supply. New species, I believe, tend to grow up in isolation from others, then proliferate quickly when conditions become just right. Old and new species can grow

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up side by side and coexist for millennia. Older species can die out when the environment changes by some small, critical margin."

The acceptance of Eldredge's and Gould's theory has followed their own model closely. The theory of gradualism was relatively unchallenged for over a century. Punctuated equilibrium itself has proliferated rapidly in the past decade, exploding into scientific respectability like one of their species models. This lends support to one of Gould's overriding concerns, the influence of prevailing social biases on science.

You suggest in The Panda's Thumb *that gradualism as a dominant scientific idea was a product of a bias of Western civilization in favor of social order and stability.*

"It's more than that. It's the natural, unquestioned world-view of smug Victorian gentlemen who believe in a well-ordered and stratified society, undisturbed by the threat of social change. It's virtually unconscious. Darwin himself was gradualism's leading adherent. On the eve of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, T. H. Huxley, Darwin's good friend, pleaded with him not to include it as an essential part of the argument for natural selection."

Then you're saying that scientists are never completely objective, that they're bound up in their own times and social structures?

"That scientists are people? Sure. They have prejudices just like everyone else. Learning itself is no protection against prejudice. What a scientist has to do is become *aware* of those unreasoned assumptions, in order to make breakthroughs."

What do you think the dominant biases of biological science have been, over the past century?

"One has been the notion of progress. Darwin himself rejected the notion that evolution was tending toward any particular ideal. Unlike many of his supporters, he believed that evolution is essentially unplanned and undirected, that nature selects only those organisms that are

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fit for a particular environment."

How do you define 'fit?'

"Well, I don't mean just simple survival. That's a tautology. I'd say fitness is—better design, perhaps."

Better? But doesn't that go against what you've just been saying about progress?

"No. I mean better in a very narrow sense. Nature builds good design by accumulating those traits that improve adaptation to a particular set of local pressures. There are all kinds of creatures in nature we would find loathesome—the ichneumon wasp, for example, which feeds on the bodies of other animals while they're still alive. The ichneumons are doing fine; their prospects for survival are good. There are parasitic organisms that do well by living inside crabs, just as we do well living inside of cities."

But surely you believe in some sort of progression — increased levels of organization, increased levels of intelligence?

"But it didn't *have* to happen that way. Look: the

STEPHEN JAY GOULD ON
The search for extraterrestrial intelligence

"**There's** no way to calculate accurately the probability that life, especially intelligent life comparable to ours, exists elsewhere in the universe. You can make the numbers do anything you want them to do. There are any number of ways it could have happened, some that we can predict, and others that we can't. But I don't see any scientific reason to rule out the possibility. That's why I'd like to see more research done on the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. It's so simple and cheap to do, scientifically. And, no matter what the odds are, if it did produce results, it would be the most cataclysmic discovery in human history."

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PROFILE

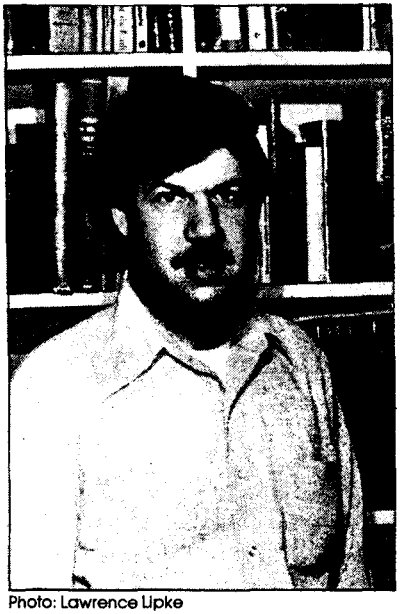

Photo: Lawrence Lipke

earth has been around for at least 5 billion years, and for at least five-sixths of that time, there was nothing on it but 'primitive' cells like bacteria and algae. Then, about 600 million years ago, *wham!* comes the Cambrian explosion, and virtually all the different designs of higher animal life appear in a million years or less."

What caused it?

"I don't know. Nobody does, for sure. It might have been sufficient oxygen. Sexual reproduction may have been the trigger, more efficiently scrambling the gene pools. There were millions and millions of years for it to happen in, and it didn't. There's no scientific reason to assume it had to turn out the way it did."

What are some other prevalent scientific biases?

"One is the tendency to try to read morality into nature. It's similar to the notion of progress toward some inevitable goal, and it's the basis of my objections to the sociobiologists. It's evident in the debate over the fundamental unit of

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evolutionary change. Darwin thought it was the individual, that nature recognizes no higher good than the survival of the individual organism. But V. C. Wynne-Edwards suggests that species themselves are selected."

Do you agree?

"To some extent. It's partly a matter of definition. In certain situations in which individuals act together as a group, selection can act for or against the group as a whole. It helps to explain certain altruistic behaviors that don't improve individual survival."

What about Richard Dawkins's argument that the gene is the fundamental unit, that a body is only a 'selfish' gene's way of perpetuating itself?

"I think it's a gross oversimplification, the most extreme kind of reductionism. That's another bad habit in Western science—trying to understand wholes by breaking them down into their smallest discrete parts. In most disciplines, the world is not reducible to lower levels of simple principles that are always right.

"The fallacy here is that genes are invisible; that is, they can't be seen directly by the forces of natural selection. Bodies, influenced indirectly by genes, can develop traits that can be selected for or against, but there's no one-to-one mapping between particular genes and particular parts of the body."

You've devoted an entire book, The Mismeasure of Man, *to another cultural bias—biological determinism: the belief that biology is destiny, that inherited distinctions between races, classes, and sexes cause social and economic differences.*

"Not quite. I didn't tackle *all* of determinism in one book, only one aspect of it—the belief that individuals and groups can be ranked according to intelligence as a single, quantifiable trait. The argument is coming back, as it always does in times of political retrenchment.

"The notion of the superiority of the white race, and men, and the inferiority of other races, and women, has a long legacy, stretching back into prehistory. It was a

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powerful idea, and is a powerful idea, because it supports the existing social structure. Last century, science served racism and sexism by the measurement of heads (they did it by filling skulls with seeds, incidentally). This century it's being done with intelligence testing. In going back over the old data, I found not only cases of outright falsification, as in Cyril Burt's twin studies, but pervasive, unconscious prejudice as well, which was far more interesting."

Why is that?

"You can't learn as much from overt racists; they tend to be dismissed. You learn from the writings of reasonable, often compassionate people such as Lincoln or Emerson, Agassiz or even Darwin, for whom the inferiority of the black races is an unquestioned assumption, something to be regretted. When an idea like that is so widespread and so all-inclusive, it's not surprising that a complex set of data, such as skull measurements or test scores, would be subject to unconscious distortion and selection, even by dedicated scientists."

You make that point in the introduction to the book:

"Science must be understood as a social phenomenon, a gutsy, human enterprise, not the work of robots programmed to collect pure information. Facts are not pure and unsullied bits of information. Culture also influences what we see and how we see it." All right, then, what about your own prejudices? What are the cultural biases, the assumptions that color your own work?

"How would I know that? If I knew them, I'd be trying to avoid them, wouldn't I?"

But isn't the fact that you were born into an age of rapid social change, of political and cultural revolution, likely to make you more sympathetic to models of abrupt change in nature?

Gould pauses again and grins. He's been expecting the question.

"I'm sure it's easier for us to come up with these ideas, and

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get a sympathetic hearing, in these times, just as gradualism suited better an era of social stability. In fact, in our article on punctuated equilibrium in *Paleobiology* we wrote: 'It may also not be irrelevant that one of us learned his Marxism literally at his daddy's knee.' That itself doesn't rule out the validity of the thesis. I'm sure there are fashions in ideology and philosophy, but they usually have deeper root causes."

Are you saying that ideas evolve the way species do?

"Only in the broadest metaphorical sense. I don't think the Darwinian model holds for ideas, because they're not discrete organisms. They shift around and take parts of each other, changing their meanings entirely."

How do you think new ideas arise in culture? Does one area have any priority? Do they begin first in the sciences, for example, or in the arts or humanities, or somewhere outside the culture?

"I don't think so. I think there is continuous feedback between society and philosophy. I do think ideas are 'in the air' at a particular time. A perfect example of that is that Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace developed the theory of natural selection at the same time in isolation from each other.

"And creativity doesn't always strike like a thunderbolt, either. Darwin's legendary moment of insight into natural selection was preceded by years of deliberation. Darwin comes back from his voyage on *The Beagle*, and there are a couple of years of study and work before the theory begins to crystallize. He shops around, reads this and that, everything from Malthus to Adam Smith."

Adam Smith? The economist?

"Yes. Smith is an important influence on Darwin. It's obvious in what I consider Darwin's overemphasis on individuals, and a sort of natural 'laissez faire' economy. In fact, I think the theory works a whole lot better in nature than it does in economics."

Why do you say that?

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PROFILE

"Because organisms in nature are not conscious agents. They have only a limited ability to learn from their environment. They are more succeptible to the 'invisible hand.'

"Consciousness changes all the rules. It makes organisms like man capable of 'unnatural acts,' like not reproducing or becoming a monk. I call human social evolution 'Lamarkian,' because it *does* involve retention of acquired characteristics. Humans can pass on traits they develop to their offspring—like your TV."

What do you think the ultimate results of social and cultural evolution on biological evolution will be?

"They could be pretty disastrous. The impact of conscious intelligence on the biological world has already been profound and devastating."

What about such genetic traits as diabetes or near-sightedness? Aren't we perpetuating traits that aren't survival-oriented?

"I don't think the world will soon be populated by nothing but hemophiliacs and diabetics. And there's not a whole hell of a lot we could, or should, do about it if it happened. Any laws we could pass restricting who does or doesn't reproduce would cause far worse problems than the ones they'd contain."

What if there is a widespread breakdown, if the social support systems collapse?

"Then biological evolution sweeps in again and reduces the numbers. Or, if we think fast, we'll have a bunch of near-sighted shamans sitting back and running things."

What do you think the human race's chances for survival are right now?

"I really don't think I'm qualified to make a judgment like that. I don't know who is. I always get ticked off when I turn on the tube and see a bunch of futurologists yapping about the prospects for humanity. They're invariably wrong. Life's too short, I think, for that kind of speculation among serious scientists. I think we should work on what we *can* solve, in

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our own lifetimes."

What about the increasing threat of nuclear war?

"That's more specific. I do

STEPHEN JAY GOULD ON
Scientific creationism and secular humanism

"I don't think that science is, or should be, the source of ethics and values. I think it's useful rhetoric for the Moral Majority to claim that young people's minds are more influenced these days by their schools, their peers, even television, than by their churches and families; to blame scientists and 'secular humanists' for a decline in morality. I don't think that Jerry Falwell is afraid of science itself. The fear is that the study of science teaches you that you would not need to have an ultimate authority in the creation of the universe, or in world affairs, or in the family, for that matter. I think that disturbs them enormously.

"I don't think the so-called 'creationism' debate is about science—or about religion either. I've never said that a belief in God is incompatible with scientific study. Hundreds of thousands of reputable, responsible scientists are also deeply religious and see no contradiction in that stance. And few organized religious groups claim the scientific creationists for their own.

"I think their motives are largely political. The core of the movement is the highly-organized evangelical right, and the drive to teach 'creation' in the schools is just one front in a battle to reverse many of the reforms of the last century—women's rights, racial equality, separation of church and state—and substitute a specific narrow paternalistic viewpoint by government fiat. The enemy is not fundamentalism; it's intolerance. As Clarence Darrow said: 'Ignorance and fanaticism are ever busy and need feeding. Always feeding and gloating for more.' Responsible people should always do what they can to oppose that kind of intolerance."

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think we have a good chance of wiping ourselves off the map with nuclear weapons. There I can only hope that good ideas do predominate. And they usually do in the long run, if they're backed up by some powerful social force, like human survival."

How do you react when people blame science for the mess we're in?

"Science didn't *do* anything to create the mess we're in. Science is only a tool, a socially governed activity. It reflects the values of the people who use it."

Do you feel that science places too much emphasis on a kind of pure, abstract rationalism?

"Perhaps. It's been the fashion in science to believe in strict objectivity and not in the use of intuition. But I don't think that's the way scientific insight really works, and I'm not sure they're two different things. Let me give you an example. A few years back I was smacked in the eye with a squash ball. I was supposed to keep it immobilized, so I had to patch both eyes. I thought it would be a terrific opportunity to get some serious thinking done, free from distractions. I couldn't come up with a thing.

"I'm skeptical of the myth that science itself is an objective enterprise. But I do believe that a factual reality exists, that we can improve our knowledge about that reality by science. Here I agree with Huxley that a scientist's responsibility is to make his own aspirations conform with the facts, not to make the facts harmonize with his aspirations."

What advice would you give to a young person contemplating a career in science?

"I'm always reluctant to give that kind of advice—to play the guru. I'd give small suggestions. Don't rigidify yourself. Stay skeptical. Ask questions. Learn to play a musical instrument. Do it for yourself. Enjoy it. Stay excited." ●

Tappan King is a free-lance writer and creative consultant specializing in science fiction and fantasy.

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MARTIN GARDNER

AND HE BUILT ANOTHER CROOKED HOUSE

If you ever read Robert Heinlein's classic story about a tesseract, or four-dimensional cube, you may recall the plot. It began when Quintus Teal, architect extraordinary, built a crooked house somewhere near Los Angeles for his rich oilman friend, Homer Bailey.

Imagine six cardboard squares joined along edges to make a cube. You can cut along seven edges and unfold the cube to make a flat Latin cross. In an analogous way, a four-dimensional creature could join eight cubes at their faces to make a tesseract. If certain of these faces are cut, the tesseract will unfold to make a solid three-dimensional cross of eight attached cubes. This was

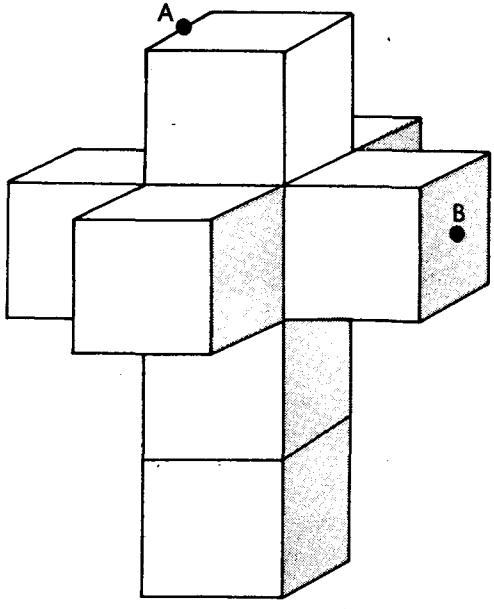

Figure 1

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the structure that Teal built. Unfortunately, a small California earthquake caused the house to collapse along its natural joints into a stable tesseract. After some bizarre experiences inside the four-dimensional house, a more severe earthquake caused the structure to drop into another space and totally disappear.

A few months ago, when I was visiting some magician friends at the Magic Castle, in Hollywood, I thought of Quintus Teal. On an impulse, I checked the Los Angeles telephone directory. To my surprise, there was his name! He was still living on Lookout Mountain, not far from Laurel Canyon.

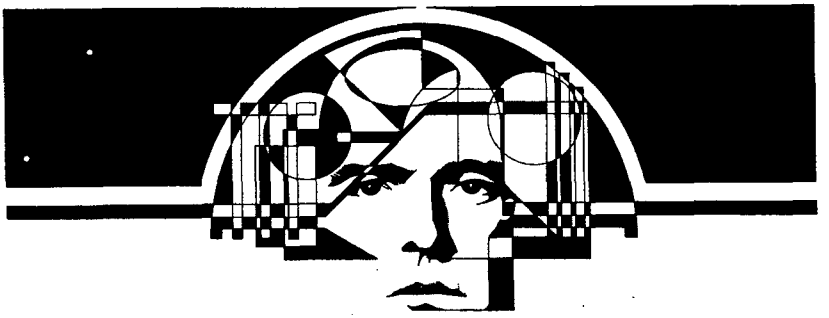
"Of course I know who you are," he said on the phone. "I've been enjoying your puzzle tales in *Asimov's* magazine ever since the thing started."

Naturally, I drove out to see him. To my amazement, I found him living alone in another crooked house, exactly like the first one except that he had turned the three-dimensional cross right-side up instead of upside-down as it had been before. Figure 1 shows how it looked. Salvador Dali had used this same structure for the cross in his well known painting of the crucifixion, *Corpus Hypercubus*.

"I built it much sturdier this time," said Teal, a bushy-bearded, bald-headed man in his late sixties. "If the San Andreas Fault acts up, I've got nothing to worry about."

Teal had a strong interest in recreational mathematics. In fact, we spent most of the afternoon and evening discussing puzzles that were related in some way to the structure of his house.

One of Teal's best ideas was to search for geodesics, or shortest possible paths, between two points on the outside of the house. For example, suppose a spider started from point A, at the middle of an edge, and crawled along the outside surface of the house to point *B*, at the center of a square face. If the spider took the shortest possible route, how far did it travel? The answer is on page 76.



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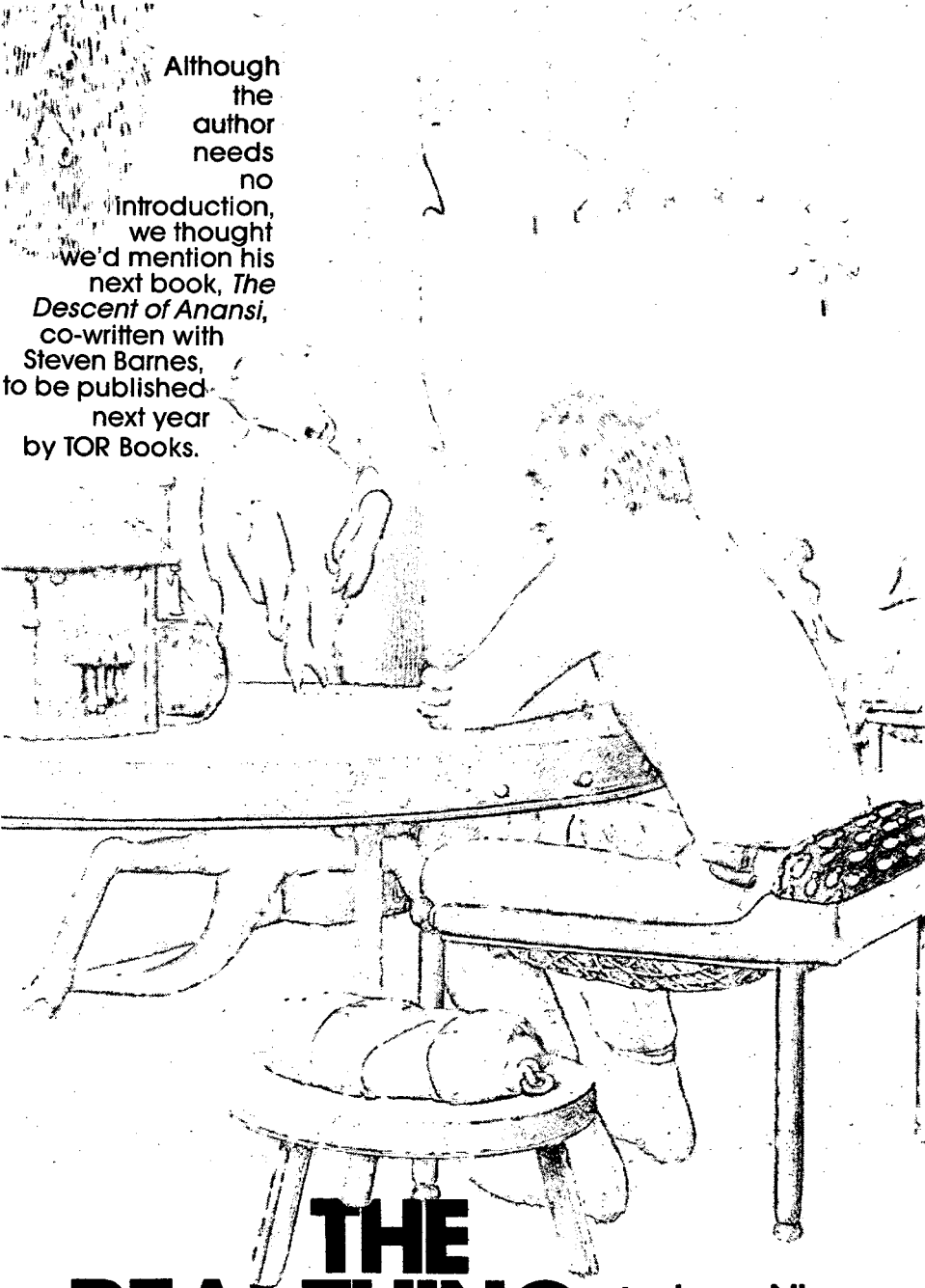
Although the author needs no introduction, we thought we'd mention his next book, *The Descent of Anansi*, co-written with Steven Barnes, to be published next year by TOR Books.



THE REAL THING

by Larry Niven

art: Richard Crist

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If the IRS could see me now! Flying a light-sail craft, single-handed, two million miles out from a bluish-white dwarf star. Fiddling frantically with the shrouds, guided less by the instruments than by the thrust against my web hammock and the ripples in the tremendous, near-weightless mirror sail. Glancing into the sun without blinking, then at the stars without being night-blind; dipping near the sun without being fried; all due to the quick-adjusting goggles and temp-controlled skin-tight pressure suit the chirpsithra had given me.

This entire trip was deductible, of course. The Draco Tavern had made me a good deal of money over the years, but I never could have paid for an interstellar voyage otherwise. As the owner of the Draco Tavern, Earth's only multi-species bar, I was quite legitimately touring the stars to find new products for my alien customers.

Would Internal Revenue object to my enjoying myself?

I couldn't make myself care. The trip out on the chirpsithra liner: that alone was something I'd remember the rest of my life. This too, if I lived. Best not to distract myself with memories.

Hroyd System was clustered tightly around its small, hot sun. Space was thick with asteroids and planets and other sailing ships. Every so often some massive piece of space junk bombed the sun, or a storm would bubble up from beneath the photosphere, and my boat would surge under the pressure of the flare. I had to fiddle constantly with the shrouds.

The pointer was aimed at black space. Where *was* that damned spaceport? Huge and massive it had seemed, too big to lose, when I spun out my frail silver sail and launched . . . how long ago? The clock told me: twenty hours. It didn't feel that long.

The spaceport was coin-shaped, spun for varying gravities. Maybe I was trying to see it edge-on? I tilted the sail to lose some velocity. The fat sun expanded. My mind felt the heat. If my suit failed, it would fail all at once, and I wouldn't have long to curse my recklessness. Or—even chirpsithra-supplied equipment wouldn't help me if I fell into the sun.

I looked outward in time to see a silver coin pass over me. Good enough. Tilt the sail forward, pick up some speed . . . pull my orbit outward, slow down, *don't move the sail too fast or it'll fold up!* Wait a bit, then tilt the sail to spill the light; drop a bit, wait again . . . watch a black coin slide across the sun. Tilt to slow, tilt again to catch up. It was another two hours before I could pull into the spaceport's shadow, fold the sail, and let a tractor beam pull me in.

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My legs were shaky as I descended the escalator to Level 6.

There was Earth gravity on 6, minus a few kilos, and also a multi-species restaurant bar. I was too tired to wonder about the domed boxes I saw on some of the tables. I wobbled over to a table, turned on the privacy bubble, and tapped *tee tee hatch nex ool*, carefully. That code was my life. A wrong character could broil me, freeze me, flatten me, or have me drinking liquid methane or breathing prussic acid.

An Earthlike environment formed around me. I peeled off my equipment and sank into a web, sighing with relief. I still ached everywhere. What I really needed was sleep. But it had been glorious!

A warbling whistle caused me to look up. My translator said, "Sir or madam, what can I bring you?"

The bartender was a small, spindly Hroydan, and his environment suit glowed at dull red heat. I said, "Something alcoholic."

"Alcohol? What is your physiological type?"

"Tee tee hatch nex ool."

"Ah. May I recommend something? A liqueur, Opal Fire."

Considering the probable distance to the nearest gin-and-tonic . . . "Fine. What proof is it?" I heard his translator skip a word, and amplified: "What percent ethyl alcohol?"

"Thirty-four, with no other metabolic poisons."

About seventy proof. "Over water ice, please."

He brought a clear glass bottle. The fluid within did indeed glitter like an opal. Its beauty was the first thing I noticed. Then the taste, slightly tart, with an overtone that can't be described in any human language. A crackling aftertaste, and a fire spreading through my nervous system. I said, "That's *wonderful!* What about side effects?"

"There are additives to compensate: thiamine and the like. You will feel no ugly aftereffects," the Hroydan assured me.

"They'd love it on Earth. Mmm . . . what's it cost?"

"Quite cheap. Twenty-nine chirp notes per flagon. Transport costs would be up to the chirpsithra. But I'm sure Chignthil Interstellar would sell specs for manufacture."

"This could pay for my whole trip." I jotted the names: chirp characters for *Opal Fire* and *Chignthil Interstellar*. The stuff was still dancing through my nervous system. I drank again, so it could dance on my taste buds too.

To hell with sleep; I was ready for another new experience. "These boxes—I see them on all the tables. What are they?"

"Full-sensory entertainment devices. Cost is six chirp notes for

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use." He tapped keys, and a list appeared: titles, I assumed, in alien script. "If you can't read this, there is voice translation."

I dithered. Tempting, dangerous. But a couple of these might be worth taking back. Some of my customers can't use anything I stock; they pay only cover charges. "How versatile is it? Your customers seem to have a lot of different sense organs. Hey, would this thing actually give me alien senses?"

The bartender signalled negative. "The device acts on your central nervous system; I assume you have one? There at the top? Ah, good. It feeds you a story skeleton, but your own imagination puts you in context and fills in the background details. You live a programmed story but largely in terms familiar to you. Mental damage is almost unheard of."

"Will I know it's only an entertainment?"

"You might know from the advertisements. Shall I show you?" The Hroydan raised the metal dome on a many-jointed arm and poised it over my head. I felt the heat emanating from him. "Perhaps you would like to walk through an active volcano?" He tapped two buttons with a black metal claw, and everything changed.

The Vollek merchant pulled the helmet away from my head. He had small, delicate-looking arms and a stance like a Tyrannosaur: torso horizontal, swung from the hips. A feathery down covered him, signalling his origin as a flightless bird. "How did you like it?"

"Give me a minute." I looked about me. Afternoon sunlight spilled across the tables, illuminating alien shapes. The Draco Tavern was filling up. It was time I got back to tending bar. It had been nearly empty (I remembered) when I agreed to try this stunt.

I said, "That business at the end—?"

"We end all of the programs that way when we sell to Level Four civilizations. It prevents disorientation."

"Good idea." Whatever the reason, I didn't feel at all confused. Still, it was a hell of an experience. "I couldn't tell it from the real thing."

"The advertisement would have alerted an experienced user."

"You're actually manufacturing these things on Earth?"

"Guatemala has agreed to license us. The climate is so nice there. And so I can lower the price per unit to three thousand dollars each."

"Sell me two," I said. It'd be a few years before they paid for themselves. Maybe someday I really would have enough money

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to ride the chirpsithra liners . . . if I didn't get hooked myself on these full-sensory machines. "Now, about Opal Fire. I can't believe it's really that good—"

"I travel for Chignthil Interstellar too. I have sample bottles."

"Let's try it." ●

IAsfm Puzzle #3

from page

Solution to "Squeeze Play"

B	A	L	L	■	R	A	S	H	■	■	R	A	S	P
E	L	O	I	■	A	B	H	O	R	■	U	N	T	O
A	L	O	E	■	R	E	A	T	A	■	N	D	A	K
M	A	N	SF	I	E	L	D	■	M	I	SF	I	R	E
■	■	■	L	E	G	S	■	I	SF	O	R	■	■	■
B	U	SF	A	R	E	■	O	N	A	N	O	T	E	■
A	L	O	T	■	M	A	N	O	N	■	M	I	G	S
I	R	R	■	■	■	L	A	I	■	■	■	A	R	K
L	I	Z	A	■	A	T	I	L	T	■	U	R	E	Y
■	C	A	L	L	SF	O	R	■	H	I	SF	A	T	E
■	■	■	L	O	I	S	■	M	I	L	O	■	■	■
G	E	T	SF	A	T	■	N	O	SF	E	R	A	T	U
A	R	I	A	■	A	G	O	R	A	■	C	L	O	G
M	I	M	I	■	S	E	G	A	L	■	E	A	R	L
S	E	E	R	■	■	L	O	L	L	■	S	W	A	Y

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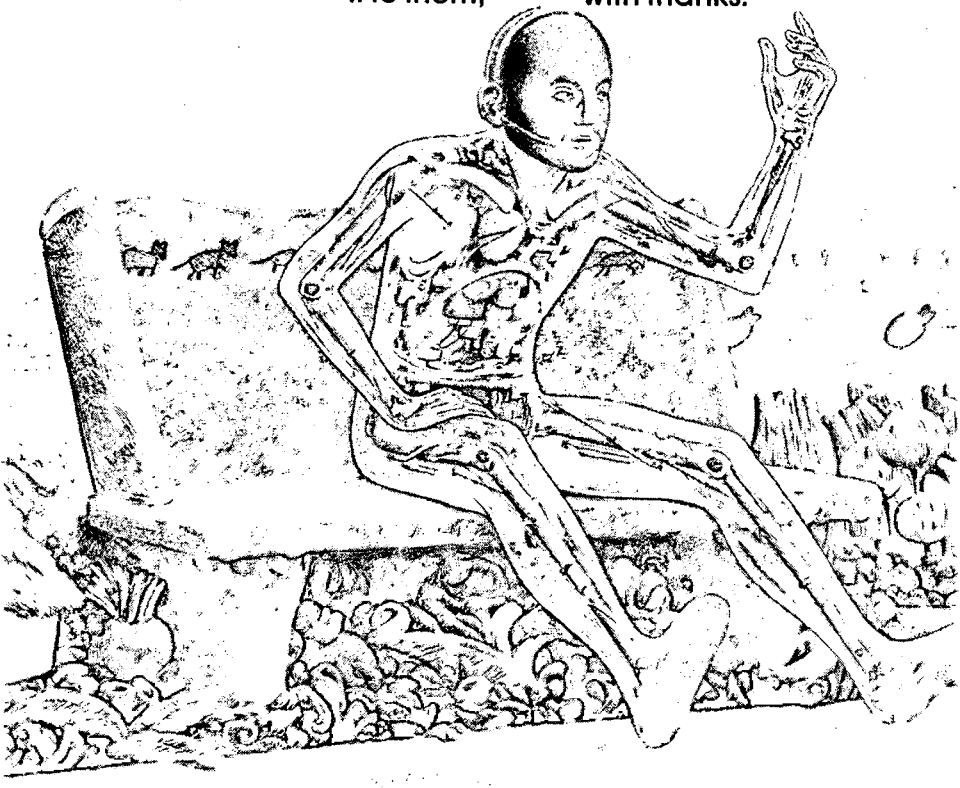
BLUE HEART

by Stephanie A. Smith

art: Richard Crist

The author, 22 years old, lives in Portland, Oregon, and this is her first professional sale. The story was written during the 1981 Haystack Writing Workshop under the direction of teachers Vonda McIntyre, Elizabeth Lynn, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Ms. Smith would like to dedicate it to them, with thanks.



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Sansel stood alone beneath her bedroom's skylight and stretched over to examine her legs: white legs, threaded with burst veins. Rubbing and flexing her swollen fingers despite their stiffness, she glanced down a glass breezeway into Beacon Kield's main hall.

"Mendir?" she called. No answer. Pulling on a robe, she walked through the breezeway, still massaging her fingers.

"Mendir?" She poked her head into the cavernous hall, letting her gaze rest on the spacecraft there. It stood in the center of the octagonal room, squat on squat legs, its underbelly burnt brown.

I should have taken myself home years ago, she thought. It's almost too late now.

"I'm going to die here. . . . " she said aloud. Turning abruptly, she peered through the breezeway windows to watch the coming storm.

Outside of the Kield house, Mendir pushed his way to the gate and then ran down the path to the doorway. Hailstones mixed with the falling snow clattered against his metallic face as he rounded a corner. From beneath the flapping veil of his slicker, he caught a glimpse of Sansel's robe, framed by the black lintel of the open door. He quickened his pace.

"Where have you been?" she asked him as he came inside. Rubbing her arms briskly, Sansel shut the door with her hip. "I don't like waking to an empty house."

Mendir brushed himself off and hung up the slicker. His silver face, an ageless mask, glinted under the dimmed lights, gem-sharp and exactly the same as Sansel had specified years before. He folded his snow-veil and accepted the robe she handed him, slipping it on over his artificial body: an ice-wrapped silver skeleton with supple, transparent skin that encased blue steel machinery.

"I went out before the storm began. For this." From the pocket of the slicker he took a snowstar, the Gueamin summer's last blossom.

She lifted the large flower from his fingers.

"I saw it while I was fixing one of the gates. The storm would have covered it."

"Water," she said, examining a leaf. "The petals are drooping." She walked down a second breezeway into the kitchen and Mendir followed her. Opening a cabinet, she took out a red-veined crystal bowl as he dialed for the breakfast meal. The chef hummed.

Cutting off the stem of the snowstar, she shook her head. "I'm not going to change my mind. That's what this flower is for, isn't it? And the food? To change my mind."

He said nothing but folded his arms and watched the chef brew a pot of tea.

"I know what you're doing. It won't work. I'm not going to change

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my mind."

"Come and eat." He retrieved a hot and well-spiced plate of food from the chef and set it down on the table. The aroma of spiced tea and spicy food mingled. Sansel sighed and closed her eyes.

He turned then to look at her with his own, white-irised ebony eyes. "I remember. It does smell good, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Very." She picked up a mug and then set it down sharply. "But I won't miss it."

"I did." He poured the tea and changed the subject. "The snow isn't too deep yet."

"No, though we could be snowed in by nightfall, don't you think?" Her voice cracked a little. I am old, old, she thought, and look at him! There is no brittleness in him. She covered the weakness in her voice with a cough, glancing up.

"I've been busy this morning," he said, avoiding her look. "Wait until you taste the breads I've baked." He laughed his hollow reflection of a laugh. "And for supper, I've made a batch of chelt for you."

"I won't need it," she said.

"Of course you will. Tonight's going to be cold. Chelt will be just the thing to warm you."

"I won't be cold. Not tonight, Mendir." She captured his wire-veined hand, holding it tightly until he sat still, as if he were a child. "I'm going ahead with the transition tonight."

He shook his head. "It won't work."

"Mendir, I—"

"Please don't."

She sighed. "I'm overdue at home. My replacement is likely to be on the way. If I don't go ahead and—"

"But what about me?" he cut in. "What if you should die in transition? You're not replaceable, to me."

"I am going to die, regardless." She shifted in her chair. "Transition will work."

"No, it won't."

"It will." She began to eat her meal slowly, savoring the flush of spice-heat that reddened her cheeks. "I refuse to sit idly while my life drains away. You know as well as I do that I can't guide the ships the way I used to. I get stiffer day by day now, instead of year by year. Last night, I had trouble guiding a simple probe. I was shocked when I saw how much an easy job like that wore me out." She gestured with her spoon toward the main hall. "I'm lucky a starship hasn't been by. Freighters, satellites, even personal shuttles are slow. I might be able to give them the directional shift they need

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to keep their sleepcrews on course. But a starship moves. It could slip out of my control before I'd be able to help. Then what do you think would happen?"

"I don't know," he whispered.

She broke off a bit of bread. "Why don't you think it will work? Is it that I'm too old to construct the thing properly? Or do you think there's something wrong with it?"

Mendir brushed back her frayed hair. "How could I tell if there was something wrong, love?"

"You couldn't." She shook her head.

"Sansel."

"What?"

His glass lips were cool and dry on her cheek. "You don't know what you might be leaving behind. You don't understand what you are going to lose."

"Of course I do. Nothing." She laughed, pushing him aside gently. "Nothing but death."

"And the taste of food; the satisfaction of tea on a winter's night; rain on your bare head; feeling; flesh." He stood and picked her up.

She laid her head against his smooth neck and hugged him. "But you do feel things. I programmed the specifications for your body, I know what you're capable of."

"It's not the same." He set her on her feet. "I'm telling you. Even forty years of being in here, living this way, can't erase the memory of flesh. I may not be able to have food, but I remember the value of hunger."

"I want to live," she said with finality. "And I've got to be a guide—I've got to have the net. If you can't understand, after all these years, that the net and my ability to become a part of it are necessities to me, then think of yourself. You'd be forced to work for a stranger. You'd have to stay here; my replacement would value your help, and there's nowhere else for you. Not in your world and not in mine."

"I could make a place, here—"

She shook her head. "You don't believe that, do you?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know. I could try."

Together they walked back down through the kitchen breezeway to the hall, passing under the wing of the spacecraft. Suddenly, she quickened her step, heading alone for her bedroom. "I've got to check the net," she said without pausing to turn. "I'll talk to you about this later."

He nodded.

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"But," she added as she moved away. "I'm not—"

"—going to change your mind. I know."

Mendir stood in the hall until he heard the hum of Sansel's door closing behind her. Then he turned and made his way to his own room. The place was cluttered, filled with a floor loom and several shuttles, its skylighted ceiling strung with drying, medicinal herbs. Spools of weaving grass and several finished tapestries sat on the shelves.

Mendir turned up the lights and picked up one of the tapestries. He stared at it for some time, shook it out, held it up. At last he draped it over one arm and went to a wooden chest. He pulled out another piece from the chest and placed the tapestries side by side on the cold floor. Crouching, he glanced from one to the other.

"No," he murmured. In a sweeping motion he lifted the newest tapestry and flung it across the room. "It's no good. I'm no good anymore."

He sat back and folded his arms. After a few minutes he stood and put the remaining piece back in the chest. Then he turned his attention to a wheeled table that stood in the center of the room. He bent over to examine the artificial body lying there. Sansel had brought it in to him a night ago. Point for point, it was a twin to his own: a silver and glass reflection, colored wires and blue wire mesh.

"Sansel," he whispered into the silence.

In her room, Sansel sat down on the bed and relaxed to free her mind and allow herself to move out beyond the confines of her body. Using deep meditation and the training she had been given as an apprentice-guide, she released her mind's energy from its bodily restraints. Her consciousness sped away, bursting along the directional energy-net that surrounded her adopted planet. Invisible except to her and to the navigators aboard the ships, the net shifted and wavered in the diamond field of star-light, a beacon flag to people from her homeworld, signaling safety. With the net, Sansel could cradle her people as they came through this area of the galaxy and navigate them in the direction they wished to go, since by the time they had reached her planet, the crews were all in suspension.

Born and raised to solitude, Sansel loved this lonely planetary outpost, loved the sense of expansion and freedom when she became one with the net. She felt rich in the knowledge that she safeguarded her people with the filaments of her mind.

Mendir wheeled the body out of his room and into the hall. A tray suspended between the table's legs was stocked with water bottles.

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As he pushed the whole collection down the breezeway, the bottles clacked together, a musical sound, glass touching glass.

She stood waiting at the end of the hall as he approached. "I see you've decided to help me get . . . "

"I never said I wouldn't."

"No." She sighed, brushing past him to walk before the cart. "No one was in the net. I made a mistake."

"Again?"

"Yes, again."

"Oh." He was afraid to say more and watched her instead.

"Never mind." She smiled. "It doesn't matter. The net can stay empty, as long as I can be a part of it." She quickened her pace. "Come on, I want to get this over with."

The obsidian floor and walls of the corridor dimly reflected her white arms, her orchid white face, her white hair. She tried to ignore the ghostly triplicate image. At the end of the corridor they came to another room.

Mendir fitted the table-cart under one of the machines. Automatic fastenings snapped. "I wish you'd reconsider," he murmured as he transferred the jars from the cart to their holders.

"Just what is wrong with you?" She turned away from one of the panels. "What have you got your mind set against, anyway?"

"Suicide."

"And just how am I committing suicide?" She closed her eyes and spoke slowly, as if she expected to break apart at any moment. "Do you want to serve this other, younger guide, this replacement of mine? Is that it?"

Mendir nearly dropped the jar he was carrying. Carefully, he set it down. "Is that what you think?"

She flinched and lowered her voice. "You tell me! What am I supposed to think? Here I offer you my company for a long, long time and you refuse it."

He took a step toward her. "Do you mean that? Is that truly the reason you want to do this?"

"I wouldn't say something I—"

"Come on then. I need to talk to you."

She didn't move, puzzled. "Why? We can talk here. What is the matter?"

"Come on. This room is too cold for you. And I can't think in here, with that . . . thing . . . staring at the ceiling." He pulled her along and together they walked to the greenhouse. Snow was piled high against the thick windows.

She sat on a garden bench and let the warmth work its way into

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her knotted muscles and joints. She stretched. "Talk."

"I thought you would change your mind." Mendir knelt and righted a fallen silkgrass plant, packing the earth around it. "When I thought your only reason for this change was the net, I decided not to say anything. I didn't want to interfere."

She rubbed her eyes. "Well, when you first put the idea into my head—"

"I was hoping—"

"That I'd forget? Well—"

"Forget? No . . . I . . . " He saw that she had misunderstood him entirely.

She shrugged. "As I said at the time, among my people a transition isn't usually granted unless someone is completely crippled. Or has no chance for a normal life. Well, I've had my full life span; I'm not entitled to a transition. And yet I have enough of the materials here to grant it to myself. After all—"

"—it worked on me," he said.

She frowned. "That isn't what I was going to say. You make it sound as if you were an experiment."

He brushed off his hands and sat beside her. He struck his own thigh. "Wasn't it? I didn't choose to be like this."

"No, what you did choose was to climb Mt. Oron. Against every Gueamin tradition. It wasn't my fault you walked into the security net. I was in deep meditation. I couldn't leave myself unguarded. You—"

Mendir clenched his hands and turned his marbled gaze on her. "Don't."

"You would have died, my love. I couldn't let you die. As it was, you were in suspension much too long before I could get your body ready. It must have been so cold and dark. Like the nights when I'm tired and can't reach the stars or feel the net. Death must be like that. Not this." She ran her hand up his arm. "Here." She touched the chill plate of his face. "Inside. If I have my mind and my net, then I'm alive, warm, like the blue heart of a flame—"

"Is that all?"

"What?"

He leaned over, folding his hands between his knees. "Your mind and your net." He shook his head. "Blue is a cold color."

"You were dying."

"Yes." He looked at her and whispered, "Do you love me at all?"

"Of course!" She folded her arms, leaning back. "I always have."

"How?"

"What do you mean, how?"

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He laughed quietly. "Never mind. When I woke up in here, a"—he smiled—"a blue heart in a jar, I was terrified."

"I remember."

"And you were there."

"Yes?"

"Don't leave."

She sighed. "I never have. I never will, after tonight."

He chafed her hand. "But you have left me. When you go to the net. When you talk about it. I can't—"

"I'm a guide," she said coldly. "Nothing can change that. I've told you before."

"Nothing," he repeated flatly. "Well. I was a weaver once. A long time ago. I thought nothing could change that, but I was wrong." He sighed. "Remember this?" He began to sing quietly:

> Weaver, weaver, throw your threads,
> Out to the soundless seas.
> Net the ships of sons and daughters,
> Send them home to me.

Sansel laughed. "Of course! I thought you'd forgotten your weaver's songs, after so long. How does the rest go? 'Spider, spider—'

> Spin your web,
> Across the quiet grasses,
> Link the space from leaf to leaf,
> Jewel the empty pastures.
>
> Weaver, weaver, search among the islands,
> Sail the sky from star to star,
> Weaving ever farther.' "

She rested her head against Mendir's shoulder. "They're true, those ancient songs of your world. That is what I do, in a way, for the lost. I must . . . "

He tensed. "Stop."

"I can't just sit and wait to die."

"You don't know how it will be," he whispered, more to himself than to her. "You don't understand what I mean."

She eyed him. "I have some idea. Haven't you told me about it over and over?"

"Yes." He stood up. "And no. I'm not a guide. How do you know whether you'll be able to stand the change?"

"My body may be feeble, but my mind isn't. Not yet, anyway. Besides, I'll have a lot fewer adjustments to make than you did, even

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though I did feed your mind with information about my world before I let you wake up. Unless—is there something you haven't told me?"

Mendir sat down, hesitating. "What if you should lose your skill as a guide?"

She said nothing for several moments. At last she whispered: "No. It won't happen."

"Sansel—"

"No, I said!" She stood. "No."

Mendir didn't move. "All right, I can't argue. I'm not a guide. I'm just a primitive weaver who can't weave."

She touched his arm. "It's not the same sort of skill."

"No?"

"No." She turned to leave.

"What can I do to help?" he called after her.

She smiled at him. "Nothing. I'm ready now. All I need is myself."

"Let me come and—"

"Don't." She put her hand an his shoulder. "You were unconscious when I helped your mind transfer, but still it would be painful for you to watch."

"And there's nothing I can say?"

"No. Don't worry. I can handle this." Then she was gone.

He leaned back on the bench, remembering himself as whole and human, a native of Gueame, a grass weaver. He remembered his secretive and solitary climb up Mt. Oron, a climb he believed would lead to the object of his dreams—the Net-Weaver of the old songs. If he could learn skills from her! Every one in Gueame knew the songs of the net, and all were taught the lore of its magic. The songs told of a crystal Kield house, hidden in the snows of Oron.

And so one day he stood before the great open doors and stared at the sprawling Kield, the tall and faceless walls, the strange, octagonal brilliance of the eight seamless glass breezeways that linked the main hall with its circular workrooms. A stone and metal spider, somnolent in the snow and sun.

He walked to the open doorway. One more step and he would be there. The net-keeper couldn't possibly turn him away, not after he had climbed the mountain, defied his people's cowardice. He had stepped . . .

. . . off the edge of his world. He remembered his limbs lying useless and scorched, his body twisted, in the snow. He'd been caught, he found out later, in the small energy web that guarded the Kield doors while Sansel was among the stars. Something had smelled awful, he remembered, but he had felt nothing. He had broken his neck.

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Mendir blinked himself awake from the memory. The sky was dark now and the garden still. It was late.

"Sansel?" he called. No one answered. He hurried out looking for her, suddenly afraid.

The door to her bedroom was open. She sat crouched against the lintel, naked in her new, gleaming body, her silver face shining from the lights as if she were sweating. Beyond her he glimpsed the bed. He looked away before he could catch sight of her old self.

"Sansel?"

"I tried," she whispered as he approached. "I tried, and it doesn't work." She stared up at him, her white irises wide.

"But it did work." He bent down to her.

"No. I can't reach the net."

Mendir kept his voice even. "Are you sure?"

"My mind reaches and is thrown back in on itself."

He placed his hands firmly around her wrists. "It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're alive."

"Alive? Aren't you listening?" She pulled her arms away, balling her fists. "I'm no use now." She shook her head back and forth. He leaned over and she pushed him away so that he backed off a little.

"No, no, it can't be," she said. "Maybe I haven't given myself enough time." She closed her eyes.

He waited, listening to the dual clicking of their bodies' inner workings. Waiting.

At last, she looked at him, her pupils contracted to white needles of fear. "I'm trapped in here."

"Not alone."

She blinked. "Trapped."

"No."

"I've given up everything—for nothing."

"For life!" He calmed himself. "You still have me."

She turned on him. "You! You knew this would happen. Why didn't you—"

He slid his arm around her waist, glass against glass. "You're alive, Sansel, alive. There are other things in this world for us. I had to learn that. So will you."

"You knew! You could have stopped me."

"I had a suspicion. I tried to tell you." He tightened his grip.

"No, you only suggested it. But you knew—"

"I love you," he said simply. "Love me."

Sansel sat there, caught in his cold embrace, a frozen statue with a blue metal core, bereft even of tears while Mendir waited for her to come to him, as once, long ago, he had come to her. ●

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GOOD GOLLY, MISS MOLLY

by Steven Bryan Bieler

art: Odbert

The author, a native of Massachusetts, now resides in Seattle. He's had stories in *Unearth* and *New Dimensions 11*, and he says that he'd like us to pronounce his name as if the "i" were another "e."

Even Steven, Horse Handicapper, carefully checked the card for the big race. "I'm picking Miss Molly to win," he told his companion, Demented Physicist Particle Breakdown.

Dr. Breakdown considered this datum. His own pick, Grade Point Average, was entered in the same race. His life savings were on that horse. Even Steven was infallible, the best handicapper on campus. Something had to be done.

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"What is this other information?" Dr. Breakdown asked, pointing at the racing form.

"That's Miss Molly's lineage," Even Steven explained. "She was sired by R. O. Beethoven, out of Maybelline."

"Thank you," the demented physicist replied. "I am going to powder my nose. I shall return." He hurried out to the parking lot. Locating his car, Dr. Breakdown extracted from the trunk a Phillips-head screwdriver, a toothbrush, his spare tire, five felt pens, and a plumber's helper. With these materials he constructed a duplicate of the time machine in the university physics lab. He selected the proper coordinates (tenured professors never select *im*proper coordinates), traveled to the recent past, and with a small but effective handgun shot Maybelline prior to her impregnation by R. O. Beethoven. Returning to the present, Dr. Breakdown rejoined Even Steven in time to see Miss Molly win—by five lengths!

"Oh, pooh!" Dr. Breakdown exclaimed. Again employing his time machine, he shot Maybelline, R. O. Beethoven, and Miss Molly's maternal grandfather, My Local DJ. Moving forward a bit, he shot Miss Molly herself only hours before the big race. Imagine his surprise when Miss Molly won the race—by five lengths!

"My actions lack sufficient scope," the desperate Doctor reasoned. The time machine, powered by his Subaru's cigarette lighter, thundered into action. Dr. Breakdown was determined to succeed. All these trips in time were draining his battery. Through astute use of time warps and government property, he bombed the Normans back into the Stone Age before their conquest of England in 1066. Herman's Hermits had to find another title for their big hit, "Henry the Eighth." He arrived on the deck of the *Santa Maria* on a foggy night in 1492 and altered the compass to read north of true west. Columbus discovered New Jersey. Jumping ahead a century, he delivered a paperback copy of *Peyton Place* to a promising playwright named Shakespeare. *Jonathon Livingston Othello* sold more copies than the King James Bible. In 1773 he led the Sons of Liberty aboard the wrong ships. Ten tons of decaffeinated instant coffee were thrown into Boston Harbor. Massachusetts remained an English colony. In 1853 he used his compass trick to lure Admiral Perry far south of Japan. Perry opened *Australia* to the West. The Australians bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. The West did not discover Japan until Godzilla destroyed Tokyo. And in the midst of the Cold War he prompted the defection of the Bolshoi Ballet to America and

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the dancers' assimilation into American life through employment in major league baseball. He returned to his own time, bought hot dogs for himself and his friend, and watched as Miss Molly won—by five lengths!

"Come with us, you demented physicist, you," said two men in silver uniforms. Of course! The Temporal Security Police! "We followed you through time," they explained as the denouement neared, "and fixed all the damage you did lickety-split. Miss Molly and her progenitors were not murdered, the Normans were not nuked, Columbus never discovered New Jersey nor Shakespeare the best seller, Massachusetts became one of the original thirteen states and the only one to vote Democratic in 1972, and the Japanese joined the world community in time to bomb Pearl Harbor themselves. So there!"

But as he was led away, his savings account depleted, his time machine and Subaru impounded, and his tenure blown, Dr. Particle Breakdown had one small triumph to console him.

The men in silver, like most people, had overlooked the ballet.

He cackled.

They'd be wearing some mighty strange uniforms in the World Series this year ●

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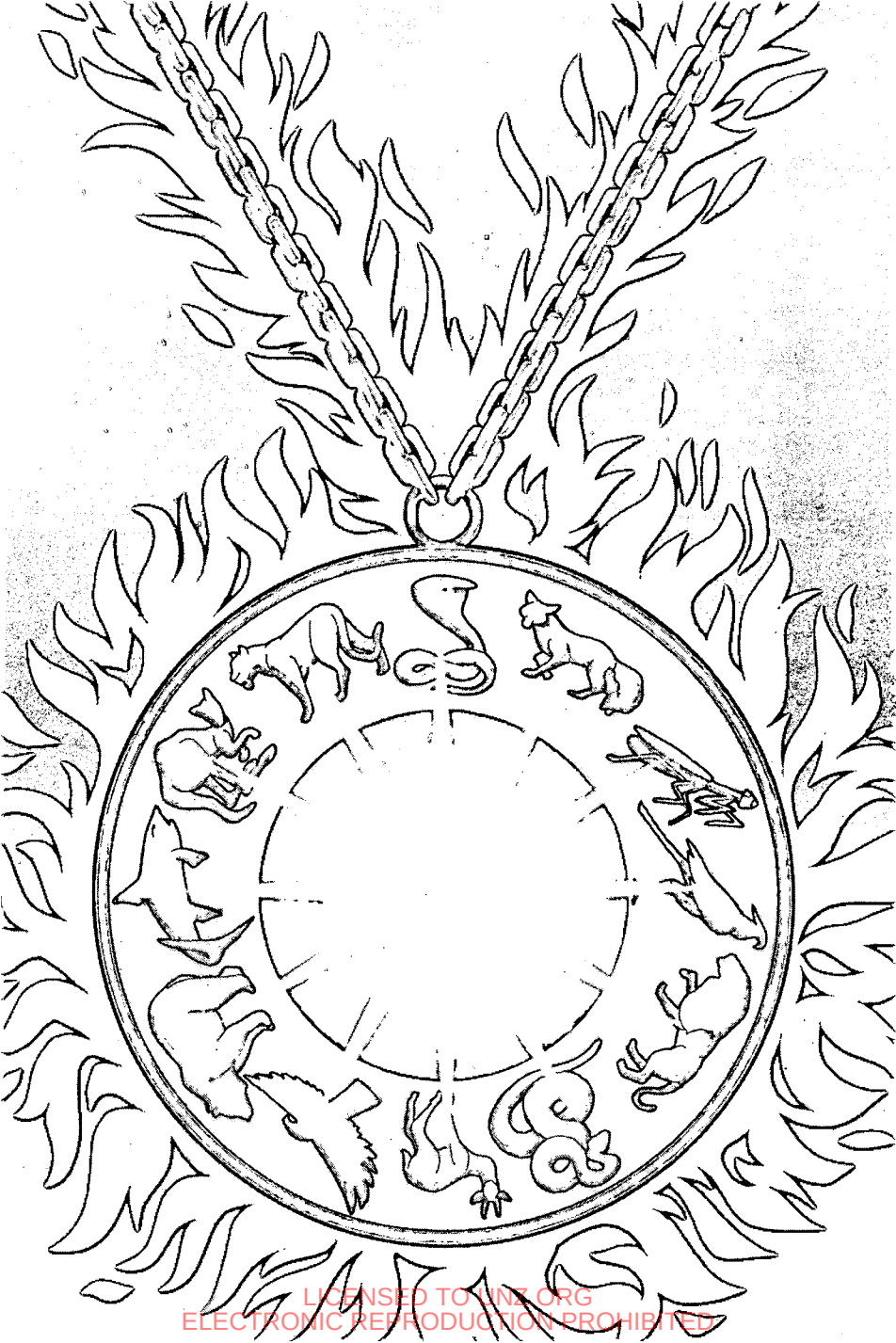

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The world ended on a slow Tuesday night.

The rain had been coming down heavily since mid-afternoon, and trade was lousy. Hank was washing some beer steins and listening to Barney Dale relate his marital woes. He had heard all of Barney's marital woes before, but there was nothing else to do. The Happy Hour crowd had departed early tonight, and Barney was the only customer in the joint.

"Nothing I do pleases her," Barney was mumbling into his draft. He was a short, balding, elderly fellow whose wife had been browbeating him for forty years now. Hank had been earwitness to at least five of those years. "I'll really catch it tonight," Barney said. "Out drinking beer, she hates that, and she's *bigger* than me. She—"

That was when the door swung open and Milton stalked in, wet and angry. He stood in the open door, rain pattering on the asphalt

CLOSING TIME

by George R.R. Martin

art: Odbert/OBI

The author is about a third of a century old and lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He's been writing and selling SF for a decade now, during which time he's won three Hugos and a Nebula. His most recent novels are *Windhaven*, written in collaboration with Lisa Tuttle, and *Fevre Dream*, due this fall from Poseidon Press. "Closing Time" is his first story in *IAsfm*.

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of the parking lot behind him, while his eyes swept back and forth across the dim, empty barroom. "Where is he?" he said loudly. "I'm going to kill the bastid, I swear I am."

Hank sighed. It was going to be another one of those nights. "First close the door, Milt," he called out. "The rain's coming in."

"Oh," said Milton. Underneath his temper, he was actually kind of a sweetheart, though you'd never know it to look at him. He stood six-foot-seven, with fists the size of cinder blocks, and twice as hard. "Sorry," he said, a bit abashed. He closed the door carefully and came striding over to the bar, working on his glower with every step. He was drenched, and his shoes squished when he walked. His anger was so palpable you almost expected the moisture to come boiling off as steam.

"The usual, Milt?" Hank asked. He flicked water off a stein, wiped it desultorily with his towel, and put it next to the others.

"Yeah," said Milton. He yanked out a barstool and sat down next to Barney, who was blinking at him in mildly inebriated astonishment. "And you tell me where that jiveass turkey has got himself to," he added.

"Who is it has you so worked up?" Hank asked, as he pulled out the creme de menthe and set to work on the grasshopper.

"Sleazy Pete," Milton growled. "I'm going to wring his skinny lil' neck for him. Where the hell is he? He hangs around here Tuesdays, don't he? I know he does. You tell that bastid he ain't gonna duck me, no way."

Hank spun a coaster onto the bar and placed the grasshopper on top of it. Milton wrapped one huge meaty hand around it and glared over at Barney Dale, as if daring him to make a comment. Barney suddenly discovered something of enormous interest in the bottom of his stein.

"You're too early," Hank said. "Pete will be in a little over four hours from now."

Milton sipped his grasshopper and grunted.

Barney raised his stein and smiled tentatively. Hank took it and drew him another. As he set it down, Barney said, "Now how do you know just when he's going to be in, Hank? You one of them ESP fellows my missus is always reading me about from the *Enquirer*?"

Hank smiled. "ESP don't come into it. Pete's a regular. I know my regulars. I know where they live and what they do for a buck and how many kids they got and what kinds of cars they drive. And I sure as hell know when they come in. Pete usually comes in early, except for Tuesdays during the summers. He always goes

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to a movie or a ball game on Tuesdays. He'll be in a couple hours before closing time." Hank picked up another stein and dipped it into the dishwater.

"I'll wait," Milton said. "When that sumbitch comes in, I'll bust his goddam head, you wait and see."

"Sure thing," Hank agreed. He didn't like trouble in his place, but he wasn't too worried. He knew his regulars. Milton couldn't hold his grasshoppers, and he was a maudlin, amiable drunk. By the time Sleazy Pete wandered in, Milt would be a pussycat. "Why are you so corked off at Pete?" Hank asked conversationally. Anything was better than Barney's marital woes. "I thought you two were buddies."

"Buddies!" Milton roared. "I'll kill the bastid. He gypped me. Here, take a look at this." He pulled something out of his pocket and tossed it onto the bar.

Barney Dale sipped his beer and stared at the thing curiously, not bold enough to reach for it. Hank set down the stein he was washing and picked it up. It was a round amulet on a heavy metal chain. He held it up to the light, and it twisted slowly. "Gold?" he asked.

"Hell, no," Milton said. "Brass. Even Pete ain't stupid enough to sell it if it was gold."

The amulet had a nice heft to it. Hank examined it more closely. All around the outside rim were little carvings of animals, all kinds of animals. In the center was a milky white stone of some sort. Thin lines ran in from the animals to the stone, like spokes on a wheel. "Interesting," Hank said. "What's the crystal in the middle?"

"Glass," said Milton. "Milkglass. Sleazy Pete said it was moonstone, whatever the hell that is, but it ain't."

Hank put the amulet back on the bar. "Can I look at it?" Barney asked, timidly. Milton stared at him and nodded.

"Pete sold it to you?" Hank said. Sleazy Pete ran a little used bookstore and bric-a-brac shop a few blocks away, and he was always coming in with one piece of junk or another and trying to sell it to some drunk. This wouldn't be the first time it had gotten him in trouble.

"Damn right," Milton said. "Lying lil' weasel. Got fifty bucks out of me for that ugly thing. I mean to get it back if I got to take it out of his hide."

"Why'd you buy it? Think it was gold?"

Milton frowned, finished his grasshopper, and signalled for another. "Hell, no," he said. "Do I look stupid or something? Knew

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it weren't no gold. Only I was drunk, and Pete said the damn thing was magic. You know. A goddam magic amulet."

"Ah," said Hank. "So you bought it because you thought it was magic, and it wasn't."

Milton looked pained. He stared morosely at the bar, shredding his coaster in his big hands. Hank gave him another with his grasshopper. "That ain't it, exactly," Milton said finally, with a touch of reluctance. "It's magic all right, but not like Pete said it'd be."

Hank looked up from his dishwater. "What?" he said. Barney Dale was staring too, looking from the amulet to Milton and then down again, blinking his watery blue eyes as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You heard me," Milton said, frowning again. "The damn thing works. Only . . . " He paused, a bit perplexed. "Maybe I ought to start at the beginning."

"That's generally a good place to start," Hank said. He was thinking that maybe it would be an interesting night after all, at least for a Tuesday.

"It was a couple weeks back," Milton said. "Right in here, this very damn place. I had a bit to drink, you know, and Sleazy Pete comes over and shows me that thing and gives me this pitch about its powers. It was supposed to be, like, a thing for *changing*."

"Changing?" Hank said.

Milton waved his hand irritably. "Shiftin' shape, that's what that bastid Pete called it. You know, werewolf stuff, like in them old movies. Only this thing don't change you into no wolf, Pete says, which was fine with me, 'cause I didn't see no sense in running around ripping out anybody's throat, you know? He says it'll change me into a bird. Says he used it himself, during the full moon, which is the only time it works, and he changed into this big hawk, flew around all night. Only Pete has got this thing about heights, you know, so he didn't want the change. Only it ain't something you got any choice about, he says. If you own the goddam amulet, when that ol' moon comes pokin' up, you change.

"Well, hell, *I* ain't got no thing about heights, and I always wanted to fly, you know, only I never had the money. Sounded like it'd be a lot of fun. So we dickered over the price for a bit, and finally I bought the thing and took it home and waited for the next full moon."

Barney had the amulet in his hand. "Last night was the first night of the full moon," he said, peering cautiously over at Milton.

"Damn right it was," Milton said.

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"And you didn't change?" Hank asked.

"Shit, I *changed* all right, but not into no goddam hawk. I'm gonna kill that lying sumbitch, I tell you. He really sold me a bill of goods. Worst night of my life."

There was a brief silence. Neither one of them wanted to press him. Finally Barney Dale cleared his throat and said, "If you don't mind me asking, exactly what kind of change did you experience?"

Milton took a long sip from his grasshopper, then turned slowly and deliberately on his stool to face Barney. Beneath his thick, bushy eyebrows, his eyes were squinty and mean. "What's your name again, little man?"

Barney swallowed. "Er, Barney. Barney Dale."

Milton smiled. "Listen up good, Mister Barney Dale. I'm gonna answer your question, you hear. But you better not laugh. I'm telling you out front. You laugh and I'm gonna twist your little head clean off and drop-kick it about fifty yards down the goddam street. You got that?"

"Er," said Barney. "Yes. Sure. I wouldn't dream of laughing."

"Real good," said Milton. "Well, the thing of it is, I turned into a rabbit."

Barney didn't laugh, Hank had to give him that. He was too scared to laugh. Hank didn't laugh either, but he found himself fighting to suppress a grin. "A rabbit?" he said.

"A rabbit. You know, a goddam Easter bunny. Hippidy-hop, hippidy-hop. One of *them.*"

"Oh," said Barney. He peered down at the amulet again and adjusted his glasses.

"A rabbit ain't no hawk," Milton said.

"That's true," Hank agreed.

"It was a goddam nightmare, I tell you, and that bastid is going to pay for every minute of hell I went through. City ain't no place for no rabbit."

"Not even a wererabbit," Hank said, smiling.

"No, sir. Nearly got run down by cars, and this one cat cornered me in this alley, and I was lucky to get out with my skin, and later on there was this dog chased me for miles, I swear. And the kids, the stinkin' little brats, they were the worst. Some of 'em threw stones, and some wanted to catch me and make me a pet. All night it was just hop, hop, hop, one goddam thing after another." He shuddered. "My legs are sore as hell, too. I swear, when Pete comes in, I'm going to take this amulet of his and shove it up where the sun don't shine."

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Barney Dale was turning the amulet round and round in his hands. "There's no rabbit on here." he said.

"What?" Milton snapped.

Barney put the disc on the bar between them. "Look," he said, "there's no rabbit. I thought perhaps these pictures here along the rim gave some indication of how it worked. You see? If there was a hawk, and then a rabbit, well, that would make sense, wouldn't it? Then we could see what followed, and no doubt the next bearer of the amulet would turn into that, whatever it might be. Only there's no rabbit, see? Here's a bird,"—he pointed—"and there's a wolf, and some kind of big cat, and all kinds of other predators, but there's no rabbit. I think these are just decorative."

Milton grunted. "Decorative. So what? Hell, I bet Pete turned into a rabbit too. Them pictures don't mean nothing. He knew what he was gettin' rid of, you bet he did. I'm going to kill him."

Barney glanced at his watch. "Er," he said, "pardon me, but you will run into a little problem there."

Milton looked over, incredulous. "You think I'm going to have a *problem* beating the hell out of a lil' nothing like Sleazy Pete?"

"I'm afraid you are," said Barney. "Hank said that Pete won't be in until a few hours before closing." He looked at his watch again. "And, if I have the correct time, moonrise will be along in about forty minutes or so. Long before closing time. You'll be a rabbit when Pete arrives."

Milton winced as if struck. "Oh, shit," he said. He looked around wildly. "Hank," he squealed, "you've gotta help me. Keep me here till dawn. Don't let no kids get me."

Hank shrugged. He was enjoying this immensely. "Anything for a regular," he said. "I got some lettuce in the fridge, too. And we can probably win a few bar bets with you."

Barney hefted the amulet in his hand. "I've got a better idea," he said. "I'll buy this from you."

Milton stared. "You'll *what?*"

"I'll buy it," Barney repeated, amiably. "Fifty dollars, you said? Here." He pulled out his wallet, extracted two twenties and a ten, and laid them on the bar. "Go on, pick it up. Then the amulet will be off your hands. You won't change, and when your friend comes in, you can beat him to a bloody pulp." He hefted the amulet again. It looked like a tiny golden wheel in his hand, with a cloudy white dented hubcap. "What do you say?"

Milton looked at Barney for a long moment, then gave a whoop of laughter and snatched up the money. "Brother, you're on!" he said. "Hell, I don't know what your game is, but I don't figure on

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spending no more time as no rabbit if I can help it. Hell, I'll even buy you a beer."

Barney slid the amulet into his pocket and stood up. "Thank you, but I'll have to decline, I'm afraid. I have to get home. My wife will kill me." He smiled slyly and started for the door.

"Barney," Hank called out, "wait a sec." He was unbearably curious. "What are you figuring?"

Barney smiled broadly. "It's a nice piece of brasswork, you know. I bet it's worth a lot more than fifty dollars, even if it isn't magic."

"But what if it is?" Hank asked. "Aren't you worried about changing?"

Barney shrugged. "Not especially. I'm going to give it to my wife, you see. She'll make a *wonderful* rabbit." He chuckled. "Good evening, gentlemen. I'll see you tomorrow."

They listened to him drive off. "Poor woman's got quite a surprise coming," said Milton. He handed Hank one of Barney's twenties. "Set me up with another."

"You still waiting for Pete?"

"Sure am," Milton said. "I figure I'll kill him anyway, just on account of last night. That's fair, ain't it?"

Hank smiled and shrugged. Three grasshoppers already. By the time Sleazy Pete made his appearance, Milton would be all sweetness and light.

A little over a half hour later, though, Milton looked up from his drink and said, "Hey, listen up! The rain stopped."

Hank listened. "I believe you're right," he said. Then, still listening, he got a cold feeling all of a sudden as he heard the sound of a car pulling up outside. It was a very distinctive sound, the putt-putt-putt of an old car with a muffler that has long ago ceased muffling. It came to a halt with a screech of worn brakes and a dull cough. Hank knew it instantly: Sleazy Pete's clunker. "So much for ESP," he said.

Milton looked at him curiously, but he didn't have time to inquire, for just then the door opened and Pete came sauntering in, all skin and bones and tattered denim and long blonde hair. "Hey, guys," he called out cheerfully. "What's happening? Game got rained out tonight. Hi, Hank. Hi, Milt."

Milton turned on his stool. "You," he said. "You are going to die." He got up and roared and started across the barroom, waving a fist the size of a wrecking ball. Sleazy Pete gave one long look before he broke and spun and raced for the parking lot. Milton followed, bellowing with rage.

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Hank sighed and reached under the bar for his Louisville slugger. What a business, he thought. He followed them outside, prepared to subdue Milton by force if he threatened any real bodily harm to Pete.

Pete was sprinting for his car, but Milton was bigger and faster. He caught Pete just as he was opening the door, yanked him back and spun him around, seized his shirtfront and lifted him into the air. Sleazy Pete screamed and kicked. "I'm going to kill you, you bastid," Milton said, and he slammed Pete down across the hood of his car, hard.

"Now, Milton," Hank said. "Cut it out. You know I can't allow this."

"Think it's fun to turn me into a rabbit, huh?" Milton said. "Maybe I'll just turn you into chopmeat and we'll see how much fun that is, huh?"

"Milton," Hank said, a little more forcefully. "Stop. I mean it now."

"Let me alone!" Pete yelled. "You're crazy! I don't know nothing about no rabbit!"

Milton smiled and balled up a huge fist.

"*Milton!*" Hank shouted, and he brought his baseball bat down hard on the fender of Pete's car. There was a satisfyingly loud thunk.

Milton, startled, looked over at Hank.

"Let him go," Hank said. He hefted the bat.

Milton frowned and released his hold on Sleazy Pete. "Oh, hell," he said. "I wasn't gonna hurt him, just muss him up a little."

"He's mussed enough," Hank observed drily. Sleazy Pete had earned his name. He denims were ragged and patched and dirty, his hair was a wild scraggle, and even his car was a twenty-year-old rambling wreck, partly faded red and mostly primer grey. Pete had never gotten around to finishing the paint job.

Pete sat up on the hood of his car, panting. "Jesus," he said. "You're one crazy dude. What the hell's wrong?"

"He says the magic amulet you sold him turned him into a rabbit," Hank said, before Milton could reply. "He didn't like it."

"Damn right I didn't," said Milton.

"A *rabbit?* That can't be right. A werehawk, that's what it was for. I used it myself. It turned you into a bird. It had to."

"I know birds, and I know rabbits. It turned me into a goddam bunny rabbit!"

Sleazy Pete scratched at his beard and looked perplexed. "That's interesting," he said. "I guess it works different on everyone who

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owns it. Maybe that pattern of animals on the rim . . ."

"Hell, no," Milton said. "We looked at that. Just decorative. Ain't no rabbits on there."

Pete looked even more puzzled. "Then I don't get it. . . . I . . . wait, wait a sec, maybe it's like a mystic key to your true nature, you know. I'm a sort of freewheeling dude, so I turned into a hawk, and you—" He saw where that was heading and stopped abruptly.

Milton made an ominous growling noise and grabbed him again. "You telling me I'm a *rabbit?* Damn it, you *are* going to die!"

Hank swore under his breath and slammed the bat down on the fender again. "Cut it *out!*" he said.

They stopped. Milton grunted and let go. Pete shook his head. "Look at whatcha done to my *car!*" he wailed. The second blow had left a big dent in the fender. "Jesus, Hank."

"Sorry," the barman said. "I'll stand you to one on the house. No one is going to notice one more dent on this thing anyhow. It's an old piece of junk and you know it."

"It's a *classic,*" Pete insisted. He ran his hand over the fender, frowning. Then he climbed off the hood and stood up. "Three free rounds, I insist. A real classic."

"One," said Hank. "I saved your life, and the car's a deathtrap. What the hell is it, anyhow?"

"You don't know your classic automobiles," Pete said, affronted. "This is a Falcon, one of the first. Ford. Wonderful little car."

Hank had stopped listening all of a sudden. He looked around. The parking lot was dark, the asphalt still slick with the recent rain, but he could make out his own van down by the corner of the building. There was only one other car in the lot. He pointed to it with his bat. "That's yours, isn't it?" he said to Milton.

"Yeah," Milton said, frowning suspiciously.

"VW?"

"Yeah," said Milton. "Brand new. A Rabbit. It gets real good . . ." He stopped, and awareness dawned in his eyes.

Hank laughed.

Pete looked from one car to another. "Oh, Jesus," he said, cradling his head in his hands. "Where the hell is that thing now? We got to keep it safe. There are all kinds of . . . Cougars, Bobcats, hell, they could *kill* somebody. . . ."

"What does he drive, Hank?" Milton demanded. "You know him, right? What kind of car has he got?"

Hank shook his head ruefully. "Poor Barney. We're safe enough. He's got a VW too. Only his is older."

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Milton nodded. "A Beetle."

"What a night he's going to have," said Milton.

Hank sighed and turned to go back into his establishment. But he stopped when he heard Sleazy Pete say, "Hey, look."

"The moon," Milton said, with a glance. Off where Pete was pointing, the sky was beginning to lighten. "The full moon. Guess it's started for the poor bastid. Hope his wife don't step on him."

That was when Hank went cold all over. He dropped the bat. It clattered on the pavement and rolled. Then he pulled out his key and turned and locked the door to his bar.

"Hey," said Milton, "it ain't closing time."

"Oh, yes, it is," Hank replied. He pointed to where the sky was growing brighter and brighter. "That isn't the moon. It's too overcast to see the moon, and anyhow that's the wrong direction." But by then none of them could mistake the glow for moonlight. It was swelling visibly, eating up half the sky, and its heart burned like the noonday sun, too bright to look upon.

"Oh, shit," Milton said, shielding his eyes and staggering back against the wall.

"He bought it for his wife," Hank said sadly.

Pete asked the last question. "What does she . . . " he began, but the flesh had melted off his bones before he could finish, and he ended with a terrible shrill scream.

Hank had only seen it once, the night that Barney's wife had come to drag him home. Barney had been so plastered that she'd needed help getting him to the car, so Hank had obliged, and he remembered. He had a good memory for things like that.

"A Nova," he said, as the world turned incandescent. ●

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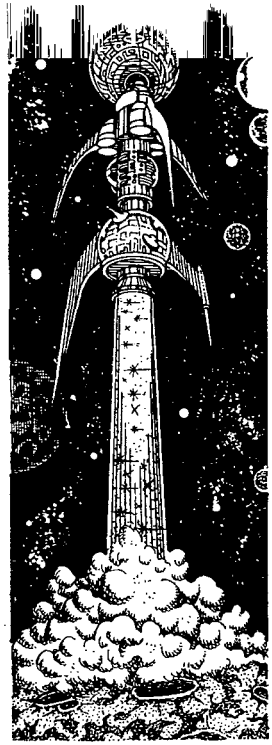

art: Robert Kraus

STARGRAZING

Omicron Ceti looks like a star:
It shines and it twinkles; it's out pretty far.
But *Omicron Ceti's* a hyperspace creature.
(You won't find its ilk in the worst movie feature.)
And that light that we see is its eye.

As you will have noticed, the light sometimes grows—
Then it scents asteroids with its keen meganose.
(You didn't think asteroids smell, I suppose;
All of which just goes to show what one knows
Of how life is lived in the sky.)

This creature last dined out in 1506
When twelve planets vanished in two mighty licks.
(Had a star for dessert!) And I can't help but wonder
If its appetite's back. Is it starting to hunger?
We really should send out a spy on some pretext
To find out if our world is next!

by Beverly Grant

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(From Page 44)

SOLUTION TO AND HE BUILT ANOTHER CROOKED HOUSE

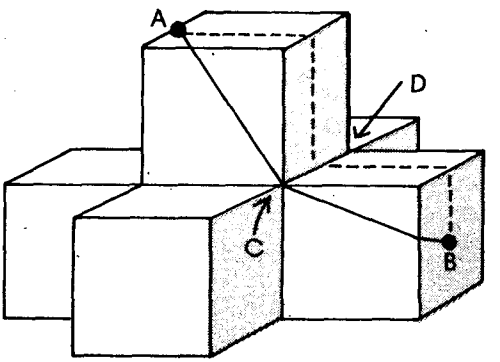

Figure 2

Did you decide that the shortest path is the one shown dotted in Figure 2? Assuming that each cube has an edge of 1, the length of this path obviously is 3.5. But this is not minimal. If the spider takes the path shown by the solid line, going first to corner *C*, we can calculate the geodesic from *A* to *B* by unfolding the faces as shown in Figure 3, then drawing straight lines from *A* to *C*, and from *C* to *B*. Applying the Pythagorean theorem, we find that *AB* is the square root of 3.25, or 1.8027+, and *BC* is the square root of 2.5, or 1.5811+. The two lengths add to 3.38+, which is slightly shorter than 3.5, the length of the dotted path.

Actually, the spider can take any of four different routes, each with the same minimal length. Instead of going from *C* to *B* as shown, it can crawl to *B* along the top of the "arm" cube. And the two paths have mirror images at the back of the house where the spider can crawl first to corner *D*, then take either of the two alternate routes from *D* to *B*.

Teal and I thought of many other pleasant puzzles based on his house, but I have space for only a few more. Maybe in a later issue I will give the others.

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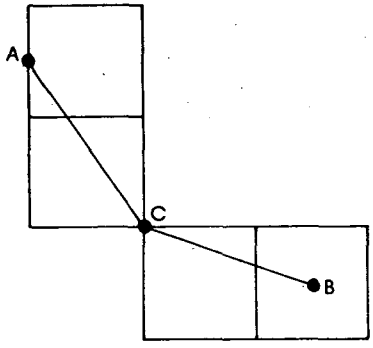

Figure 3

1. Suppose you have a small model of the house made out of solid wood. You want to saw this polycube apart to make a set of smaller polycubes—a polycube is a solid formed by attaching unit cubes at their faces—that can be fitted together to make a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ cube. What is the smallest number of cuts required?

2. Suppose you have a buzz saw and want to cut your wooden model into eight separate unit cubes. You may arrange the pieces any way you like before you make another push past the rotating blade. How many pushes are needed to produce the eight separate cubes?

3. If you color each square face on the surface of your model a solid color, and in such a way that no pair of like-colored faces touch along an edge of one of the eight cubes, how many colors are necessary and sufficient for this task?

4. Imagine a model of the "skeleton" of the house, constructed with unit-length toothpicks, held together at the corners of the cubical cells by tiny balls of clay. You may remember that Teal used toothpicks in this way to build models of the house for his friend Bailey. What is the smallest number of toothpicks you must remove from the model so that no complete skeleton of a cube remains?

See page 103 for the answers.

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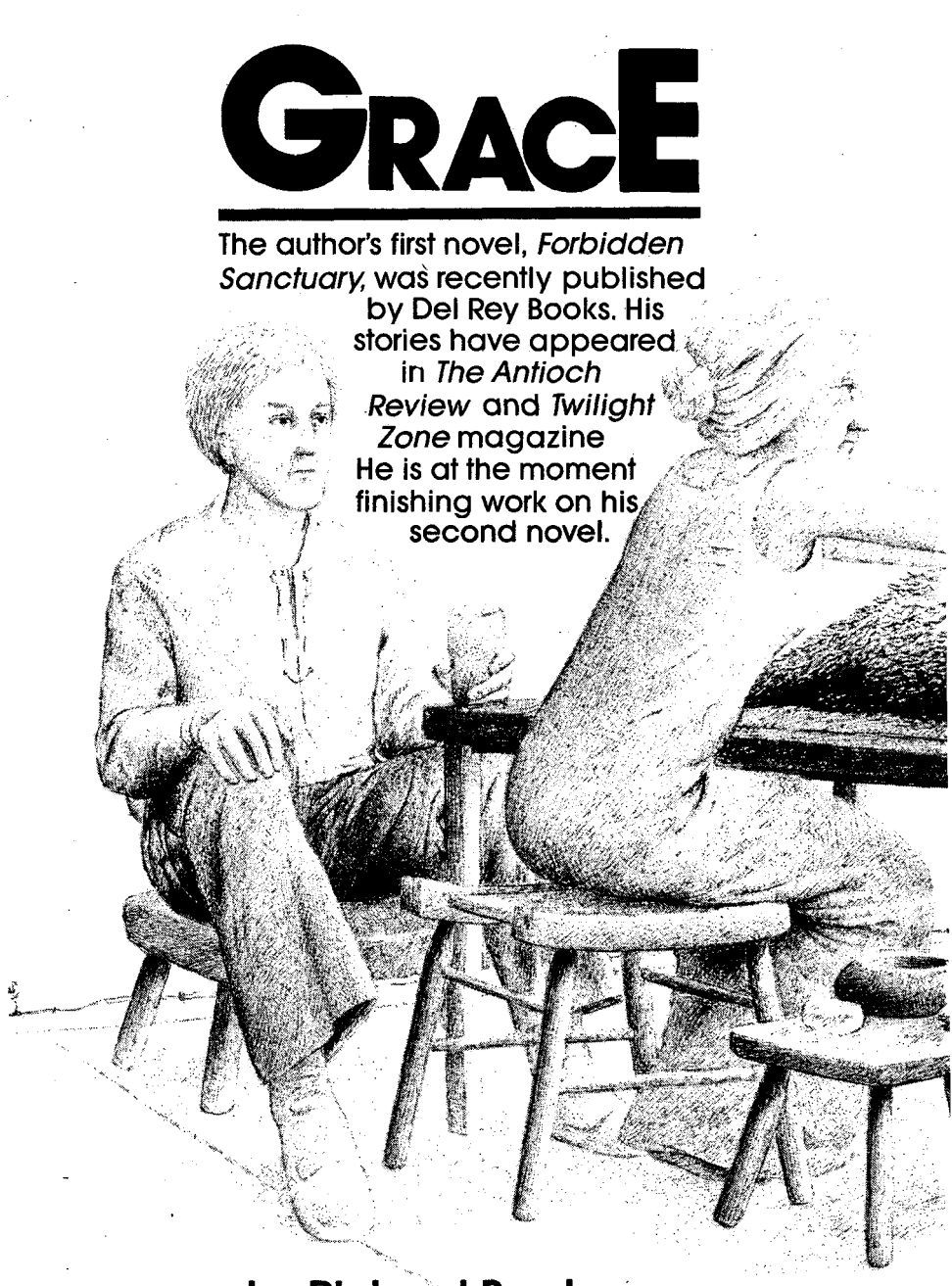
GRACE

The author's first novel, *Forbidden Sanctuary,* was recently published by Del Rey Books. His stories have appeared in *The Antioch Review* and *Twilight Zone* magazine He is at the moment finishing work on his second novel.



by Richard Bowker

art: Richard Crist

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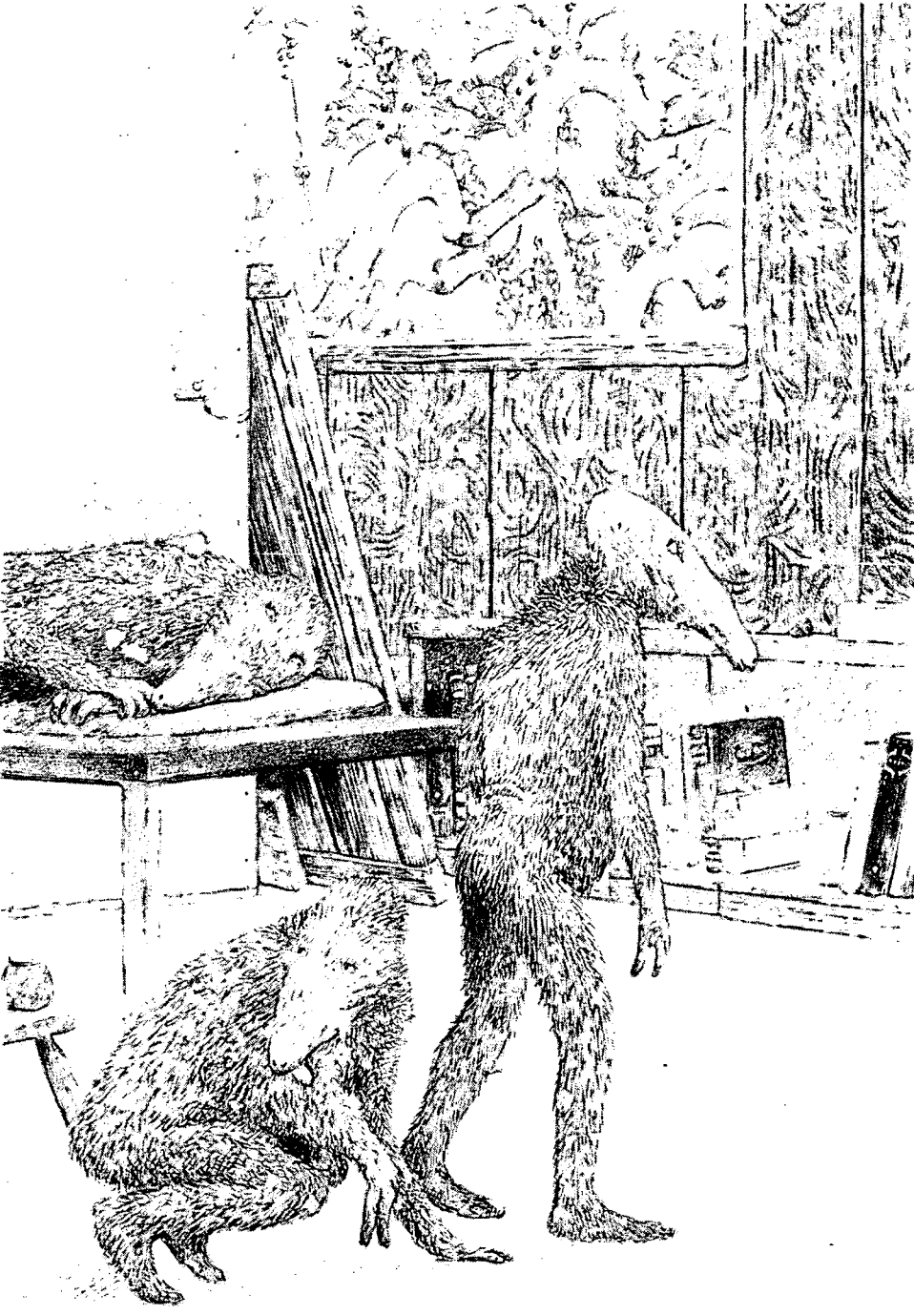

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I would see her every four months. I was a shuttle pilot on a big freighter that had the Earth-Proculon-Kepler run, and hers was by far the strangest stop on the route. For one thing, my shuttle was the only one to go down. For another, I helped with the offloading. Thank God there were no unions to worry about.

What else could I do? She was all alone except for the feejas, and the feejas were no use at all. She was quite strong for her size and age and never asked for help (never thanked you for it either); but I couldn't just sit and watch while this white-haired old lady lugged crates of supplies in the heat.

So I lugged too, cursing the feejas under my breath as the sweat poured off me and I trudged along in the 1.2 Gs. When we were done, we would sit in her hut and drink some wretched tea. Afterward she would give me the list for next time, usually handwritten on a scrap of cardboard. Then I would leave.

We spoke, on average, about six sentences a visit. Not much, considering that I was her only link to the rest of humanity, the rest of the Universe. The first time I made the run I had no idea what was going on, so I asked her.

"What are you doing here, lady?"

"I'm caring for the feejas."

"Why the hell are you doing that?"

"It is God's will."

Now there is no better conversation-stopper in known space than "It is God's will." It certainly shut me up. For years it shut me up. But meanwhile I learned a few things about her.

More than once (perhaps too often) I have told her story to a friend, sharing a pipe in a dingy saloon on some alien planet. The friend inevitably exclaims: "Why haven't I heard of this woman? She must be a legend!"

But she is not a legend. There are three reasons for this, I think: the United Nations Commission on Extraterrestrial Exploration and Colonization, the feejas, and the Fourth Vatican Council.

Everyone knows UNCEEC and its ratings: A for colonizable; B for colonization forbidden, intelligent species; C for colonization forbidden, potentially intelligent species; and so on. I don't want to get into the controversies *that* system has produced. It is the law, it is enforced, and it is accepted because there's nothing better.

The UNCEEC rating team gave Ellbern a C. They might just as well have given it an F, unfit for human habitation, if you ask

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me, but *some* brave souls—or perhaps only one—can exist in that heat, that gravity. They gave it a C because of the feejas.

The feejas. I'd prefer not to describe them, but what I have to say would be incomprehensible otherwise, so let me get it over with quickly. They are the product of God with a hangover, of evolution on an off day; a child's nightmare made flesh; a druggie's hallucination come to life. Imagine a rat a meter tall, walking on its hind legs, and less friendly-looking. Better yet, don't imagine. Just take my word for it: they're hideous.

The UNCEEC team determined that the feejas were a potentially intelligent species.

Of course, the designation "potentially intelligent" has caused more arguments than any other. "Potentially intelligent" when? Ten thousand years? Ten million years? Aren't all species at least theoretically "potentially intelligent?" I don't want to get into it. Suffice it to say that the feejas were high enough up someone's idea of the evolutionary ladder that mankind was supposed to leave them alone.

And that brings us to the Fourth Vatican Council. Everyone knows the U.N. ratings; not everyone knows the Roman Catholic Church's ratings—at least I had never heard of them until I started looking into it. But then, shuttle pilots generally don't concern themselves with such things.

With the development of the FTL drive and the discovery of alien life, the Church faced a unique question: does an alien have a soul? An obscure theological point, I suppose, but it had real ethical consequences. Do the Ten Commandments apply to one's dealings with aliens, for example? Surely you cannot steal from a rat; can you steal from a feeja?

Tough question. So they had a Council, and the Council decided: intelligent aliens have souls, just like our own. But who is to decide which species are intelligent? The Church doesn't have the resources or the expertise. Ah, but UNCEEC . . .

The Church told its members, in effect: use the UNCEEC ratings to guide your dealings with aliens. Do unto B-rated aliens as you would have them do unto you. Do unto C-rated aliens as you would do unto monkeys.

Notice, then, that according to the Church, feejas had no souls—at least not yet. This, I believe, is why Lydia Agnes McKechnie was not a legend.

She did not leave Earth until she was nearly sixty. She was born in Aberdeen, Scotland; moved to America at age eighteen;

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made her first billion in microminiaturized library cassettes at age 30 (no colonist left Earth without one, and a lot of colonists were leaving); multiplied her fortune several times over, got married, got divorced; converted to Catholicism at age 50, sold her company, wrote several books, heard about the feejas, and barely said or wrote another paragraph the rest of her life.

I summarize hurriedly, but she lived a hurried life on Earth. She was smart and ambitious, and she possessed a single-minded tenacity of purpose that is a trifle frightening to a shiftless sort like me. She hacked herself out a place in the world, decided that it wasn't what she wanted, and hacked herself out another place on another world.

Why? my red-eyed friend in the saloon asks.

Why do you think I'm writing this? I respond. Let's start with the easy part.

The feejas were sick. This was noted in the final report of the rating team. An infectious disease was gradually depleting their population. They had once covered Ellbern; now they were confined to about two hundred square kilometers of tropical jungle and savannah in the southern hemisphere. If nothing was done, they would probably die out. But who was going to do anything? UNCEEC's charter didn't say a word about trying to save a potentially intelligent species. Life was being discovered in profusion; the Universe was bursting with it. Who cared about three-foot-tall rats who might learn how to use tools in ten thousand years?

Strange justice, then. Mankind was officially prohibited from interfering with the feejas' development; at the same time the feejas were being allowed to die out because no one really cared about them—until Lydia Agnes McKechnie came along.

On occasion she would not be there when I landed, and I would have to go find her, trudging through the fetid village to the thatch-roofed infirmary, where she would be washing some feeja's open sores.

A healthy feeja is bad enough. A sick feeja should not be seen on a full stomach. The disease (which no one ever bothered to name) blotched their bodies with red sores, ate away at their extremities, and, unless it was treated, eventually destroyed their autoimmune systems and left them prey to every other illness on the wretched planet.

She would usually be surrounded by a roomful of them, licking haphazardly at their sores, awaiting her ministrations. One by

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one they would get up on the table, and she would bathe them, apply the antibiotic salve, bandage them, and send them on their way. I never stayed too long in the infirmary, but it appeared as if she did this for hours at a time. There were also bed patients, too far gone to be helped, writhing on their pallets and howling with pain. She would sit by each of them, hold their paws, and try to comfort them. Often she would succeed.

I wouldn't say the feejas loved her; I don't think they were capable of that. But certainly they associated her with health and the lessening of pain, so they trusted her, felt kindly toward her, let her take charge of them when they needed it. She was, whether or not they knew it, the only thing that stood between them and extinction.

But why her? Another easy part: she was uniquely well-equipped to do it. She had the wealth on Earth to supply herself indefinitely (even though having a freighter-stop and shuttle-delivery made for her alone was outrageously expensive). She had the connections at the U.N. to get the necessary authorizations and waivers (medical emergency, unlimited duration) to allow her to settle on Ellbern despite its rating. She had the physical strength to do the work. She had no close family or friends to leave behind on Earth. She was fearless; she was intelligent; she was persistent.

But why not do it differently? Bring a team of doctors and nurses; isolate the cause of the disease; develop a cure; do the job right?

I asked her once, after I had found out something of her background.

She looked at me with her usual preoccupied gaze—my visits were, after all, a distraction from her work—and then came as close to smiling as she ever did while I knew her. "Diseases are not of the body," she replied. "They are of the spirit."

But the feejas have no souls, I thought to myself. I didn't consider prolonging the conversation by bringing this up, though; she would just have shrugged and walked away. On the way back to the freighter it occurred to me: perhaps she was not talking about the feejas; perhaps she was talking about herself.

First facile explanation: she was performing an act of expiation; making up for past sins, real or imagined. Her life on Earth could not have been blameless; no one builds a large corporation without dealing with the devil. Those sins must have weighed on her after

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her conversion. Perhaps she sought the most difficult, demeaning task she could find in order to balance the scales. It was not the highest motive, but not an unworthy one either.

I cannot prove that this explanation is wrong (I cannot prove anything), but I know that it is. The strongest evidence I have is that she seemed to *enjoy* her work. If this was penance, it was not particularly effective. I am not saying her expression was suffused with love and happiness as she bathed those sores. But there was a *contented* quality to her actions that communicated itself even in the absence of smiles. If Lydia Agnes McKechnie had a disease of the spirit, it was well-hidden.

After I had dug out the bare facts of her past, I began to feel obscurely resentful that the Universe was paying no attention to her. Surely she deserved some recognition for her work.

What business was it of yours, pal?

No business at all—except that I did help to carry those crates, which made me sort of an accessory to her good deed. But beyond that, perhaps I hoped that other people might solve the mystery for me—explain the *why* that I couldn't seem to explain for myself.

So I decided to get her some publicity. It was a good story, after all: billionaire spends her fortune and her life treating sick aliens. The only trouble was getting a crew to Ellbern, which wasn't exactly part of the regular news runs.

I finally convinced the Universal Broadcasting news center on Proculon to send a couple of people out on the freighter, and I brought them down on my regular visit.

If she was startled at the two extra people getting out of the shuttle, she didn't show it. I asked her if it was all right if they took some pictures, asked some questions, and she shrugged. It didn't matter to her.

So they tagged along (not helping to carry the supplies). Sour-faced Eric took holos of the feejas, the infirmary, the village. Fat Samantha tried to pry loose some newsworthy remarks.

"How long have you been here, Ms. McKechnie?"

"I have forgotten."

"Do you think you'll be able to conquer this disease that is devastating the feejas?"

"I do not know."

"Do you ever get lonely here light-years away from the nearest human being?"

"No."

"What do you miss most about Earth?"

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"Nothing."

It became evident quite soon that things were not going well. The heat and the gravity were just too much for Samantha; she could barely walk, never mind keep up with the pace her hostess was setting. She sat in the shade at the infirmary and flung her questions out whenever we came near. Eric took it into his head to swat a curious feeja who tried to touch his holocam, and the cameraman was immediately surrounded by a dozen snarling, disease-ridden aliens. "They're the most disgusting things I ever saw," he muttered as we escorted him back to the shuttle.

Samantha stayed long enough to watch the treatment of a few mild cases, and then she had had enough. "Is that lady for real?" she asked as we headed back to the freighter.

"I don't know what she's doing down there if she isn't," I replied.

I got a copy of the holo the next time I was on Proculon. They called it "The Rat-Lady of Ellbern" and gave the piece a rather whimsical, "oddball of the week" tone. Meet the dotty, kind-hearted old lady who's spending her fortune taking care of these gross-looking aliens. No mention of her Catholicism. No mention of her strength, her tenacity, her seriousness.

And this is why she failed to become a legend, you see. No one could take the feejas seriously. If they had souls, perhaps the Church would have taken an interest, promoted her as a latter-day Father Damien, devoting her life to the care of her beloved patients. But lepers were pitiable—and human; feejas were disgusting, and alien, and only potentially intelligent. She was like an old lady who takes in every stray cat she can find, until her home is overrun by hundreds of cats seeking shelter and food from her, and in return giving her a reason for existence. Dotty.

Second facile explanation: she was insane. Who can say? The difference between insanity and sanctity is just a few letters, a slight change in perspective. Some would call her crazy by definition. You had to be out of your mind to do what she did. But that is trivial. Did she act crazy? Had she lost touch with reality—with who she was, who the feejas were, and what she was doing there? Not that I could tell.

After I had been going there for several years, I began to enjoy asking her pointed, difficult questions in order to get her pointed, no-nonsense answers. I have a feeling that, in her own way, she enjoyed the game too, enjoyed frustrating my attempts to crack through her armor of silence.

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"Do you think your existence will have made the Universe a better place?"

"Not a bit."

"Do you love the feejas?"

"Who can love a feeja?"

"Do they love you?"

"Who knows? Can feejas love?"

"Do you want them to love you?"

"I don't care."

Perhaps these kinds of responses are evidence of insanity. I know only that I could not have stayed there as long as she did and been as sane.

It may strike the reader that I became somewhat obsessed with Lydia Agnes McKechnie. I cannot deny it. The years went by, and the faces on the freighter changed, and I remained. *Big money to be made out in the Faraday sector. Short hops, pleasant planets . . .* No thanks. *Settin' up our own company. I know where we can get a used freighter cheap. Danny has some runs all set up. Two years, tops, and we can retire planetside and let the freighter support us. We just need a little more capital. You're not married, don't spend a penny. It's the opportunity of a lifetime . . .* No thanks.

Why not? I felt life drifting by and was not entirely pleased that I couldn't do anything more with it than make this one wide circle through the stars and think about one strange old woman who couldn't care less about me. Opportunities surrounded me, but somehow I couldn't grasp them; pleasures thrust themselves upon me, but somehow I couldn't savor them.

At times, it wasn't for want of trying. I would become determined to lift the fog in my mind and would spend a week in the brothels of Xanthea, hunt krang on Simonides, smoke grams of phtula on Kepler (and dream of creatures that would put the feejas to shame). But always I would return to the freighter and make the run and exchange my half-dozen sentences with her in the stifling heat.

On Earth, interstellar personnel usually live in housing modules clustered within fifty kilometers of their home base. It doesn't make much sense to live elsewhere: your friends are there, and the maintenance and security systems are geared to the patterns of long absences followed by short (and often riotous) stays. You feel comfortable there.

Once I decided I didn't feel like feeling comfortable, and I rented

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the second floor of an old wooden house in a nearby city. I looked out my window in the morning and watched people hurrying to their jobs. I considered how strange they all seemed to me: almost as strange as the Rat-Lady of Ellbern. But then I thought how strange I must appear to my crewmates: *Did you hear the latest? He's taken an apartment in the city. Probably get a part-time job working in the corner grocery store next.* I did not want to appear strange to them. They were my family, virtually my only contact with humanity. But here I was, sitting in this house, and this was where I wanted to be.

The owner of the house was an old Irish widow named Mrs. Kenneally. I was entirely too strange for her taste as well, but I paid an outrageous rent and was unobjectionable as a tenant, so we got along all right. On warm summer nights we would sit out on her porch and keep each other company—with a bottle of bourbon between us for when our throats became dry (Mrs. Kenneally had a medical problem of this nature). She would tell me stories about her late husband, God bless him, and her two no-good sons who shipped off one day for Podgorny and had not been heard of since. She would occasionally pump me for stories about myself—*Surely you must have seen many wonders in your travels throughout the Universe. Have you ever been to Podgorny, by any chance?*—but I had little to say until, finally, the day of the run approached and I told her about Lydia Agnes McKechnie.

It was perhaps the only time I have told the story that the listener's reaction approached my own. Mrs. Kenneally was dead silent through the telling; her glass of bourbon lay untouched. At the end she brought her hand to her lips, paused, then blessed herself quickly. "Surely the woman is a saint," she whispered.

I had wanted to hear that from someone for a long time, but now that the words had been spoken, I felt compelled to challenge them. "She is a devout Catholic, certainly, but what good is she doing anyone with all her work? Even she admits it's useless."

Mrs. Kenneally waved the objection away. "Doctors save lives, but damn few of them are saints. What counts is being saintly."

"But maybe she just *seems* saintly. How do you know if she really is?"

Mrs. Kenneally shook her head solemnly. "If what she does ain't saintly, I don't know what is."

We sat in silence for a while, and then Mrs. Kenneally went to bed. I sipped my bourbon, rocked in my chair, and listened to the night-sounds of Earth. Later I stepped out into the front yard

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and looked up at the stars, which were mostly obscured by haze and clouds. Will I ever find out *why?* I wondered.

And just which *why* did I mean?

And when would there be an end of wondering?

I went inside and got ready to leave Earth once again.

Third facile explanation: she was a saint. This is the hardest one to deal with, because it is the most attractive to me. How does one define "saint"—if we admit that Mrs. Kenneally's definition is lacking? I frankly don't know. The Catholic Church uses the term only for a dead person, and at that has been known to wait a long time—even centuries—before yielding its approval of the word. Somewhere along the line I started reading lives of saints. *You should see the vidbooks he brought with him this time.* If one can get past the pious inanities that fill most such books, their lives often bear a strong resemblance to hers: the single-mindedness of purpose, the lack of concern for everyday standards and opinions, the sense that their existence is taking place at an altogether different level from yours or mine. In general they are not particularly likable, but they are pretty awesome.

Why not, then? If not insane, then surely saintly? There cannot be a third alternative.

I sat in her hut. The only decoration was a stark, abstract crucifix. A nameless, lightly-scarred feeja had of late become something of a servant-valet-assistant to her. I couldn't stand his namelessness, so I called him Ralph. It didn't matter to him. Ralph brought us each a cup of the wretched tea and stood by the door—just enough in my line of sight to be annoying.

Night was approaching, and I was reminded of my evenings on the porch with Mrs. Kenneally. (Oh, for some bourbon! Why did I never think to bring any with me?) Nothing about the situation was the same except me and my strangeness, so my strangeness made the connection, and made me speak:

"Are you a saint?"

She paused, and shook her head.

"Do you want to be a saint?"

An even longer pause. Then, gently, almost wistfully—if one could ascribe wistfulness to her: "The wanting disqualifies one." And she looked away.

She looked away. As much emotion as she had ever shown me. I was stunned for a moment. *Why,* I wanted to ask. Why does the wanting disqualify one? But then I knew the answer, and with it the woman. The true saint doesn't *want* to be a saint. He wants

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to take care of his lepers; she wants to start a religious order that will give glory to God. The sainthood comes by the way, unbidden. Awareness defeats this, because then the motives are sullied. The wish comes true only when it is not wished.

Do you understand, friend, reader? Would you, sitting there in fast-gathering darkness, have pitied her? Would you have reached out and covered her bony hand with your own? Would you have turned away at the hint of a tear on her shadowed face?

And one time, when I landed, she was dead. I was not particularly shocked: she was in her eighties and had given her body far more than its allotted share of abuse. But I was not ready for the stench of rotting flesh that assailed me as I approached the infirmary.

The feejas had deserted her. Rather than bury this person who had given her life for them, they had simply decamped and moved somewhere else to await their extinction, leaving her corpse to rot in the heat of their sun.

I dug a hole and did what they would not do. It damn near killed me. When the hole was filled in, I took her crucifix and stuck it in the ground above her. Then I stood silently for a moment and wondered.

I found a satchel of personal papers beneath the wooden pallet that was her bed. I took it with me; nothing else would be worth the cargo space. Let the planet take the infirmary, the hut, her simple cotton shifts (washed by hand in a foul stream), her bandages, her ointments. The rest of the Universe didn't need it; I didn't need it.

On the way back to the shuttle I saw Ralph, peeking out at me from a thicket. I stopped, and eventually he came out into the open.

His nostrils were quivering slightly, his paws were moving spasmodically, and his eyes were red. Do feejas cry?

"Why didn't you bury her?" I shouted, but he only stood there, twitching, awaiting my decision.

What could I do? I stayed. Or rather, I left and returned. There were details to be worked out. The satchel contained a will, leaving her entire estate to me, on condition I used it to care for the feejas. I made sure there were no problems with probate. I made sure the freighter would still stop and send a shuttle down to Ellbern. And I came back.

It is lonely now, but it will get better. The feejas were suspicious

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at first, but they came back too, and now I have all the work I can handle. Every four months a sallow-faced young man lands and leaves me my supplies. He hasn't asked me yet what the hell I'm doing here, but when he does, my answer will be ready.

That is how the story should end, perhaps, but this is not a story. That ending, though pat, is false. I found a laser pistol in the shuttle and blew Ralph's head off. The will I mentioned in fact existed. I contested the proviso about taking care of the feejas in every probate court in the land, and before a final decision had been reached the feejas were extinct, and the issue was moot. Justice is sometimes served by delay. Once her fortune was mine, I never left Earth again.

That is how the story should end, perhaps, but this is not a story. That ending, though true, is too pat. The fortune was mine, but I gave it away. I gave it to the Church and entered the seminary with a (somewhat) delayed vocation.

It was not an easy decision; it is one that I have questioned many times as I progress toward the priesthood. This is part of the questioning.

Specifically: what role did Lydia Agnes McKechnie play in the decision? If she had not existed, would the winding path of life still have led me to it? If not, then perhaps her years on Ellbern were not totally wasted. Don't get me wrong. I am not a saint; I am not egotistical enough to believe that heaven and Earth were moved to ensure my conversion. But I am disposed to believe in a mysterious power called grace, which perhaps enabled me to see the truth when it was (by chance?) thrust in my face. Lydia and I have both had our share of grace, I think. Perhaps she wasted hers, but that is not for me to judge. If God is loving enough to wait patiently for me, then perhaps He is loving enough to care about Ralph. If so, then my apologies for the incident with the laser pistol.

And why the funny business with the endings? the disgruntled reader asks. Because I wanted to see how they looked, to savor for a moment lives I did not choose. Because this story (and it is not a story) has no ending—any more than life has an ending. Lydia and I will meet again, you see. How much there will be to talk about then! ●

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THE DEVIL AT THE DOOR

by Steve Vance

The author has been writing professionally since 1977 and has sold four novels (three SF, one horror). He resides in Georgia.

art: John Pierard

As soon as my older son asked if he could use his brother or sister for a human sacrifice, I realized that my quiet afternoon in the den might be threatened by the minor emergencies that only children can construct. Betty, my veteran wife, had gone shopping and left me with only the instructions to keep Nehemiah, seven, Drusilla, four, and Archibald, eighteen months, out of mischief until she returned.

With a casual smile I had dismissed her, content in the knowledge that a cool head and a receptive attitude could handle any problems of child rearing. I utilized these qualities in denying Nehemiah's petition.

"I can't use Dru or Archie?" he demanded.

"That's right," I replied with that calm smile. "Your mother wouldn't like it."

"Isacaaron and Astarte!" he sighed, leaving the den. "I've sprung from a tribe of nerds!"

Not certain of the definition of a "nerd," I allowed him to depart unmolested and turned my attention back to my incomplete novel, which had been waiting in the typewriter. Drusilla, however, wasn't inclined to leave me in peace.

"Daddy?" she asked sweetly. "What's a human sacrifice?"

"It's like an animal sacrifice, only different," I said.

"Oh, I'd like to see one."

I really worry about the effects of television violence on my impressionable children, so I encourage them to develop outside interests. Naturally, I was pleased to see them following my ad-

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vice, but when a tremendous metallic crash shook the entire house from the vicinity of the kitchen, I was naturally a little upset.

"Nehemiah!" I shouted. "Now cut that out!"

"That's Archie, Daddy," corrected my daughter. "Nehemiah works in the upstairs and both baths, but the kitchen is the baby's territory."

"Then get him in here."

Like a dutiful child, Drusilla toddled into the wilds of the kitchen to retrieve her brother, and I tossed another wadded portion of my manuscript in the direction of my wastebasket. It missed.

"I didn't *do* it!" screamed an elf's voice in righteous indignation.

"Daddy wants to see you," Drusilla said.

In resignation, I closed my thesaurus. "Archibald, what, may I ask, was that ominous rumble from the kitchen?"

My youngest child is only a miniature version, but he has an excellent vocabulary for his age and plenty of spunk and ingenuity. For some reason, he was covered from head to toe with sugar.

"I didn't do it, Euripides," he repeated after shaking loose from his sister.

My name isn't Euripides, but the little fellow feels that, since I named him Archibald, he has the right to reciprocate. "You didn't do what?" I asked logically.

"Whatever it was that was done. I swear I haven't touched a match since we were kicked out of Chicago! Tell him what I was doing when you snatched me, Silly, tell him!"

"My name is Drusilla! Daddy, he was in the cookie jar."

I grinned in a fatherly fashion and patted his tousled head. "Caught with your hand in the old cookie jar, eh?"

"Not his hand," Drusilla informed me. "He was *in* the cookie jar!"

"That sounds harmless enough. What caused the minor avalanche?"

He smiled proudly. "That was my newest invention, the anti-centrifugal, counter-gravitational, dense-functional, mini-pump and rolling thing. I made it from the electric can opener and Silly's Sweet Su doll."

"My Sweet Su?" my daughter shrieked in agony.

"Just a moment, Drusilla. Archibald, what caused that pandemoniac cacophony?" I paid three-fifty for that thesaurus, and, by golly, I was determined to get my money's worth out of it.

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"Oh, that. That was my mini-pump turning over the refrigerator. Now it's cutting open the door."

I was shocked enough to start toward the kitchen door, but Archibald latched onto my right pants leg with both little fists and his teeth, sort of like a bulldog.

"Maybe you shouldn't go in there, Dad," he said around the material. "I haven't had the opportunity to install a workable guidance system in Sweet Su yet, and there's a pretty good chance it'll think you're another appliance to tip over and open."

"Isn't there any way to shut off the machine?" I asked, gently shaking him free and realizing that the pants would have to be rewoven.

"Shuts off automatically," he said proudly, "as soon as it rolls to the end of its cord and unplugs itself." He smiled up at me beneficently, with tiny bits of fabric in his white teeth. Another crash joined the first in shaking the foundations of our modest home. "I think that was the oven."

"Archibald, I'm afraid that the time for firmness has arrived," I said. "As soon as the device unplugs, I want you to go in there, rewire it, have it right all of the kitchen equipment, and then change it back into a can opener and a doll before your mother gets home."

"Sure thing, Euripides."

"And Su better have all of her hair," chimed in Drusilla. "Not like the kitten last week."

Having thus solved another domestic crisis with a little applied mental energy, I returned my full attention to the novel, or, more specifically, the table of contents. (I understand that it's significantly more difficult to compose a full-length book in this manner, but it's really exciting to try to build chapters that complement the titles you have previously chosen for them.) By the time I was mid-way through the idea for "Two: How the World Ended and After," the mini-pump/Sweet Su had disconnected itself, but when Archibald entered the other room to recircuit his malfunctioning invention, things didn't go according to plan.

For a few minutes, Drusilla and I could hear his tinkering quite clearly, and all seemed well; but when he plugged in the mechanism once again, the entire electrical system of the house immediately began to protest with short bursts of star-like radiance from the various light fixtures followed by a complete outage. Even my typewriter died a slow, whirring death. Luckily, however, the backup fuse box I had previously installed for just such

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emergencies switched over, and the electricity flowed easily back into the veins of our house.

"Archibald!" I called in consternation.

He hadn't the time to answer, though, as I discovered when the awfulest yowling and screeching erupted from the kitchen. At first, I thought that the pump/doll had begun upsetting appliances again, but my son's high-pitched and angry shouts told me that he was involved in a set-to with his powerful creation. Archibald was shouting in French, naturally, because I don't understand a word of that language and therefore can't punish him for using words ill-fitting a child of his tender age.

After a moment of this cat and cymbal symphony, before I could rush to the rescue of either or both combatants, a pink and gray object resembling a gnome with an oil barrel strapped to its back came hurtling through the doorway, zipped by my ducking head, and smashed into the den wall just below our heirloom portrait of Johann Kaspar Lavater, spraying straw-blonde hair in several directions. Archibald quickly appeared through the same doorway, strutting imperiously and without a mark on him.

"Well," he said, "I showed that thing I ain't no can of concentrated tomato sauce."

"'I'm not a,' " I corrected him.

"*Su!*" Drusilla cried in obvious horror upon realizing that the shattered creature below our painting was her transmogrified doll. She raced to the remains and began to shuffle them together tearfully.

"This will come out of your allowance," I said to Archibald. I was actually a little upset that the afternoon wasn't proceeding as smoothly as I had promised Betty that it would, but surely Drusilla would recover from the untimely death of Sweet Su before her mother returned; and certainly Archibald had slaked his thirst for adventure, at least for the rest of the day. Nehemiah was following my advice to play quietly, as I could tell by the lack of noise from upstairs. Child care wasn't so difficult if one approached it clinically.

Then a deep, rumbling explosion bellowed outward from the formerly calm second story where my elder son had been working and made my poor typewriter skip two spaces.

"Nehemiah!" I shouted in fatherly anger.

He responded more swiftly than I could recall having seen any of my offspring answer one of my calls; in fact, he practically flew down the curved staircase and landed in the den before me. He was wearing a tall, conical black cap and matching floor-length

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robe, and both were abundantly decorated with silver stars, globes, lightning streaks, and indecipherable symbols. I admired such knitting ability in one so young.

"Nehemiah, we all heard that—" I began.

He interrupted me. "Dad, I'm afraid we might be in a little trouble here." The boy strode quickly to the front door and opened it so that I was able to see an unusual bluish mist swirling about the threshold. "Yep, we're sealed in, all right."

"Sealed in?" I repeated. "By a spring afternoon fog?"

Nehemiah shook his head slowly. "It's no fog, Dad. I . . . well, when you wouldn't let me sacrifice Dru or Archie, I sort of . . . conjured up this demon, Abominalottus, you know, for the fun of it. Now he's surrounded the house and is marshalling his strength for an assault on us."

"A demon named Abominalottus? Come now, Nehemiah, a healthy imagination has always been encouraged in this family, but we have to keep a realistic perspective on the situation. No thin blue mist can threaten our safety."

"That thin blue mist is forming a head," Archibald observed.

I peered around my brood to catch sight of the strange fog spinning and mixing with itself to cast a horned, bearded, and thoroughly malicious-appearing face upon a slender stalk of a neck. "You've really progressed to that level, then?"

"It's no surprise," Drusilla sighed. "Just last month an encyclopedia salesman disappeared from our front steps, and *he's* been keeping a big green frog in his room ever since."

I fixed Nehemiah with what I intended as a stern glare.

"Well, yeah, I guess she's right," he admitted. Then he added quickly, "But I'm working on my spells, and if the bugeater will just be a little patient, I should have him closer to human in a matter of weeks. Getting back to the problem at hand, though . . . "

"This is what comes from messing with infantile, primary power fantasies just because you were a bust at hard science," commented Archibald with a superior air.

"I still think we should offer you to him," Nehemiah said as he took a menacing step forward.

Archibald dashed behind my legs (which he seldom does with anyone other than Nehemiah) and yapped, "Break us up, Dad, before this thing gets dirty! Hold me back!"

"That's enough boys," I said firmly. "This is no time for rowdy play, especially since that's obviously no fantasy that's been planted in our doorway."

"Fantasy?" roared the leering blue face in our threshold. A

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rolling peal of laughter burst from it with such vehemence that I bounced backward a step. "Fantasy, reality? I bring to you a vision of reality from the deepest pits of Gehenna that will wilt your miserable souls and send your minds spinning like fingers of paper within a gale."

Archibald popped out from behind me (as I said, he's afraid of very few people or things) and answered the fiend with a chirpy, "Oh, yeah?"

Again the demon laughed. "You, pup, shall be the morsel that whets my tongue. Even now my energies grow, my strength collects!" The devil did appear to be enlarging and becoming more substantial.

"And you, cousin, are going to get it in the mush!" retorted the young boy. He started toward the apparition with his small right fist cocked for an assault.

Catching him by the belt, I spoke to my other son, "I believe this has gone on quite long enough, Nehemiah. Cast the spell, or unrecite the charm, or whatever you have to do to remove this creature from our door."

Nehemiah adopted the same nervous, embarrassed grin he had employed when explaining about the encyclopedia salesman cum amphibian. "That's the problem, Dad. See, I got the spell to conjure him out of an old—I mean *old*—library book, but the counterspell, to get rid of him, was on one of the pages that had been ripped out of the back of it."

"*I* think we should call the fire department," stated Drusilla.

"I am Abominalottus!" shouted the demon.

Things were becoming very hectic, and it seemed clear that I would get only a little, if anything, added to my novel that afternoon, what with this blue spirit enveloping my house, Drusilla summoning the civic authorities into the problem, and Archibald's interior decorators puttering about with the furniture. "There's no need to involve the fire department in this, Drusilla," I said, and then I added a strong edge to my voice and addressed the demon, "You, fiend, we are done with you. Depart! Be gone!" I heard those lines once in a Maria Ouspenskaya movie.

Abominalottus just laughed.

Perhaps some religious muscle was required to evict an evil spirit. "It is commanded that you go back to your foul origins! St. Francis of Assisi! St. Francis Xavier! Saint Agnes! St. Pierre!"

"St. Bernard! St. Louis!" added Archibald. He swung and missed a hard, high right at the image.

Our exhortations had no effect.

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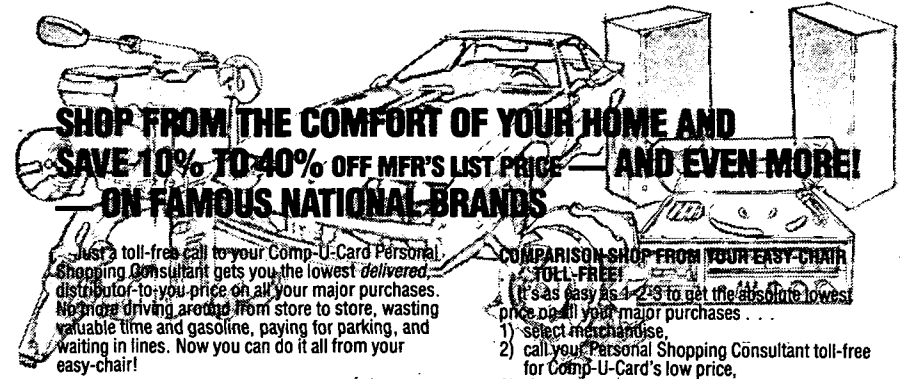

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"Whoa, Dad, Archie!" Nehemiah begged. "I think you're attacking at the wrong flank. Let me try something. We order you to disappear by the authority of Asmodeus and Belial, Ahriman, Lucifer, and Appollyon! Pluto!" As the spirit laughed away his dicta, Nehemiah's forceful tone began to fade. "Mephistopheles. Uh, Beelzebub? Old Nick, old Scratch, old Harry?" The devil continued to leer at us. "I give up," Nehemiah sighed.

"Hello, Fire Chief Barnstable?" said Drusilla in the background.

"You poor, brainless insects who will soon be my newly ground provender—see, even now I grow hands! Don't you understand that my extinction can come only by the prescribed formula which was included in the ancient volume that detailed my creation? Those pages, those leaves of refined parchment so timely ripped, rest now in the nether portions of a trumpet case belonging to a tone-deaf pre-teenaged male with inflamed adenoids."

"I don't suppose you'd consider reciting the formula for us, would you?" asked Nehemiah.

"Do not bore me with foolish prattle!"

"I'm gonna pop him one," affirmed Archibald, though I still held him out of reach of his target.

Suddenly Drusilla spoke up with a touch of weariness and disgust in her voice. "You men! Wasting the whole day by talking, talking, talking! Mumbo-jumbo isn't the answer any more than eggheaded science. And neither is physical violence, Babyfists!"

"So what is?" Archibald demanded.

"The universal absolvent, of course. When are you going to grow up, little brother?"

"In about sixteen and a half years," he replied gravely.

"The universal absolvent?" asked the demon, with curiosity.

"Naturally," answered my daughter. "Here, I'll show you some."

She searched briefly among the numerous pockets of her flower print frock before producing a small, clear, stoppered jar containing some kind of colorless liquid. "I knew I had some on me somewhere."

The demon was suspiciously cautious. "What is it?"

"Holy water, what else? Straight from the Vatican. Want to smell it?" Drusilla held it out for the spirit's scrutiny.

His reaction was one of wild terror. "No! Take it away from me! Stay back!" His fresh hands battled futilely before his contorted face.

"You can't smell it from *there,* silly!" She flipped the stopper

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free and splashed the entire contents of the little bottle over Abominalottus.

A wild cry raced from his ectoplasmic lips as the water reacted with his smoky substance with sharp flashes of light and explosions nearly as loud as the one that had signalled his arrival. Jets of steam burst outward from every point touched by the fluid, and Abominalottus began to shrivel and distort like plastic wrapping in the fireplace. "Aaaieee! Is this the end of me? I'm slipping, I'm slipping!" the devil cried.

Archibald was clapping his hands and leaping into the air, shouting, "I'm melting, Dorothy, melting!"

"Dissolve, baby, dissolve!" Nehemiah laughed.

Drusilla simply watched her handiwork in silent pleasure.

After a few moments more of the writhing and wailing of the spirit, it was reduced to a mere blue puff in the center of the threshold, and with a sound like a short hiccup, even that vanished.

"Ave atque vale," smiled Drusilla.

"Holy water! Why didn't I think of that?" said Nehemiah, slapping his forehead. "Lord knows, I've seen it annihilate Chris Lee enough!"

"I still think I should have punched him," Archibald commented.

"You know, after he ate us, he was going to wreak havoc, pillage, and cause the end of the world," Nehemiah stated.

That struck a chord. "Really?" I asked. "That certainly would have helped me with Chapter Two. Drusilla, how did you happen to have a recently blessed jar of holy water in your pocket?"

She looked up at me with that infinitely benevolent patronizing smile that only little girls command. "I didn't, Daddy. That was only a bottle of formula for my Pamper Damper dolly that I never used because I got tired of changing diapers." She swung on her heel and marched upstairs to play with the encyclopedia salesman.

"Fake holy water," I muttered appreciatively.

" 'Fake holy water'?!" snapped a disembodied voice from the doorway. As we three turned, an azure head the size of a golf ball appeared there and began to expand.

Archibald leaped gleefully into action. *"Stamp!"* he screamed as he slapped one high-topped white shoe directly onto the apparition. Abominalottus puffed into cigarette smoke about his foot and swiftly billowed across the floor into nonexistence, this

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time for good. Archibald wiped his hands and grinned over a job well done.

"Nehemiah, I am hereby ordering you to burn that book immediately," I said.

"Okay, Pop, but the frog won't enjoy seeing his one chance to transform back go up in flames," he answered.

Betty came in no more than five minutes later, by which time all had returned to normal. She entered the house tentatively, one might say cautiously, because she really didn't appreciate my abilities as a babysitter. After assuring herself that it wouldn't collapse about her, she entered the den where Archibald and I were working: I at my typewriter and he on the floor beside me spelling French words with his blocks. Drusilla and Nehemiah were in their rooms.

"Hello, everyone," she said. "Were there any problems while I was gone?"

"None," I replied blithely. "Just an ordinary afternoon."

"What are you doing, Archibald?" she asked.

"Playing quietly," he observed.

"Well, dear, I must admit, you've surprised me with your house management. I expected to see the police, fire, and sanitation departments parked in our driveway."

"Apology accepted, hon. Now, how about a late lunch?"

That was a mistake, I realized, because upon entering the kitchen, my excitable wife immediately went into near hysteria. And it didn't help matters when the three fire engines screamed up at that instant and chopped down our front door and four windows before I could stop them. But if life always ran smoothly, how dull it would all seem. Right?

And I did get a third of Chapter Two completed. ●

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SECOND SOLUTION TO AND HE BUILT ANOTHER CROOKED HOUSE

1. Three cuts will do the trick. Slice off the base to make a 2 × 1 × 1 block, and cut off two of the arm cubes. You will then have four polycubes that go together in an obvious way to make a 2 × 2 × 2 cube.

It is easy to see that this is the only way to do it. The model's height of 4 units must be cut in half to eliminate a height greater than 2, and each of the other two coordinate lengths must have a cube chopped off (from either end) to reduce the length to 2.

2. Six cuts are necessary and sufficent. To prove that six cuts are necessary, just consider the cube at the interior of the cross. To free this cube, each of its six faces must be cut.
3. Three colors.
4. Four toothpicks.

You should have no trouble finding ways to accomplish the last three tasks.

I have saved our best problem for the last. Imagine that your have eight unit cubes. Each is painted with the same three colors, with pairs of opposite faces the same color. All eight cubes are identical. With these cubes can you build a model of the house so that no pair of like-colored faces touch along an edge?

There is a quick way to answer this without having to make a set of the colored cubes. The solution is on page 173.

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THE STARRY MESSAGE TO GALILEO GALILEI

When Paole Sarpi mentioned the vague
News of an eyepiece,
One day strolling in the lazy Padua summer
Of 1609, Galileo felt a gear turn inside
On some lever of purpose.
Distance magnified,
The idea of it. . . .

In the following weeks of restless turnings,
He dreamt in color of
The farmers moving on the olive hills like ants,
The racing clouds by thousands,
The sailing ships arcing on the waves of the abyss,
The whole world
Shrinking before him into a blue lamp.

The first sight of the Netherlands telescope
Ached in Galileo's mind like a wound—
Such an inexact instrument of bad glass.
With a jeweler's eye,
He ground lens, discarded lens.
The windows in his converted shop
Grew pale with the dust.

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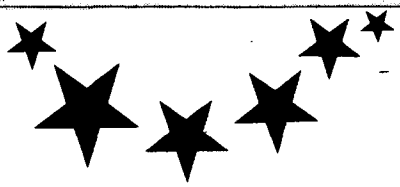

Yet the spherical aberrations vexed him.
No two lens would twin,
And he cursed his frail, flawed fingers
Until one night at a supper when
He watched a masked lady flirt with the Doge.
The eyes were reduced to essences:
Iris and pupil.

With the front piece larger by half,
And a masking cuff to match it
To the rear piece,
Galileo trued center to center,
As weights are on a scale, and opened
A curtain once closed on the human eye:
A world enlarged by nine.

Improved to 30x, he held the telescope
In unsure hands.
Could he, like Brahe, observe novae
And find them celestial in nature?
Or would the spheres and stars be found
Changeless, mirror-smooth orbs
Spinning ceaseless around Aristotle's earth?

What he saw shattered that Greek notion,
And every homocentric reality.
The craters and seas of the Moon
Whispered of collapse and growth—
All the details remained
Etched on his imagination with acid.
He reached instantly for his pencil stub.

—Robert Frazier

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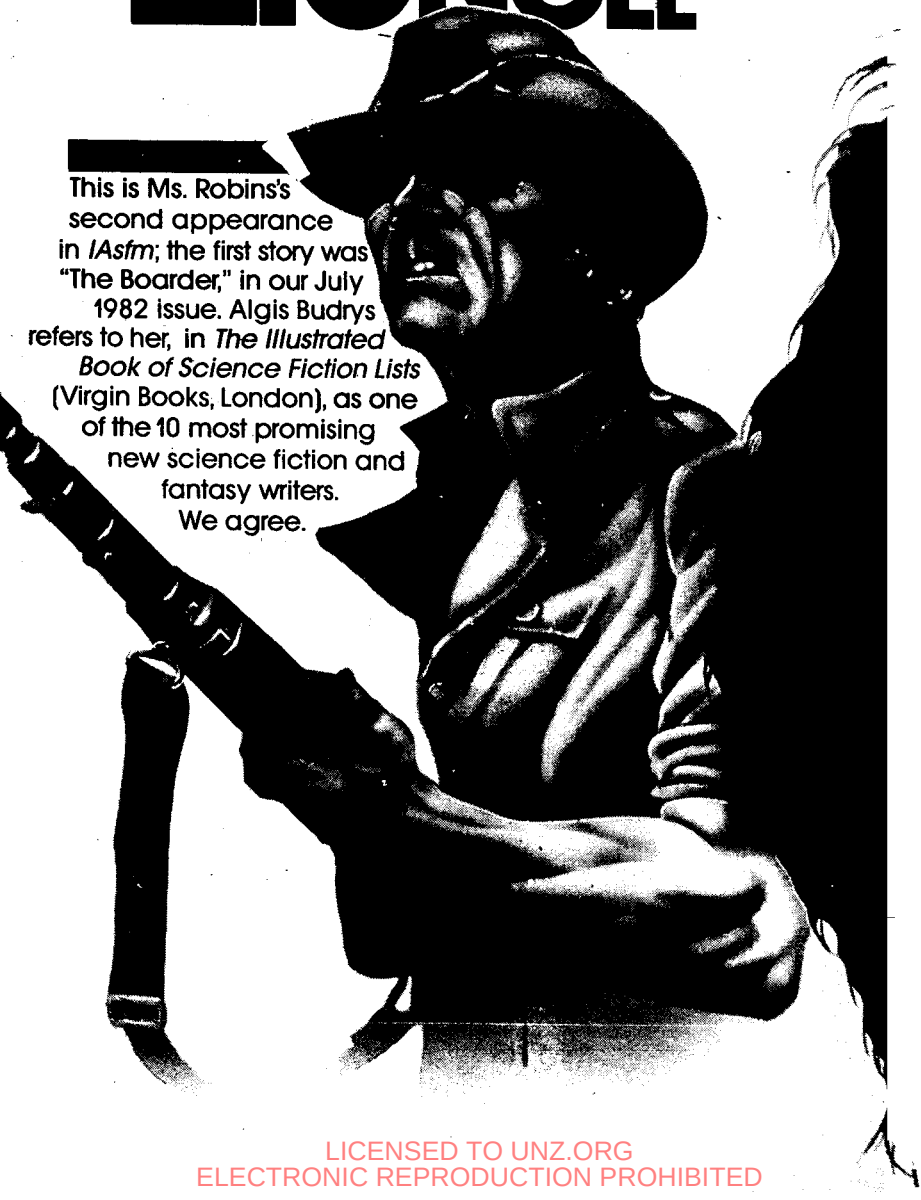
LIONCEL

by Madeleine E. Robins

art: Gary Freeman



This is Ms. Robins's second appearance in *IAsfm*; the first story was "The Boarder," in our July 1982 issue. Algis Budrys refers to her, in *The Illustrated Book of Science Fiction Lists* (Virgin Books, London), as one of the 10 most promising new science fiction and fantasy writers. We agree.

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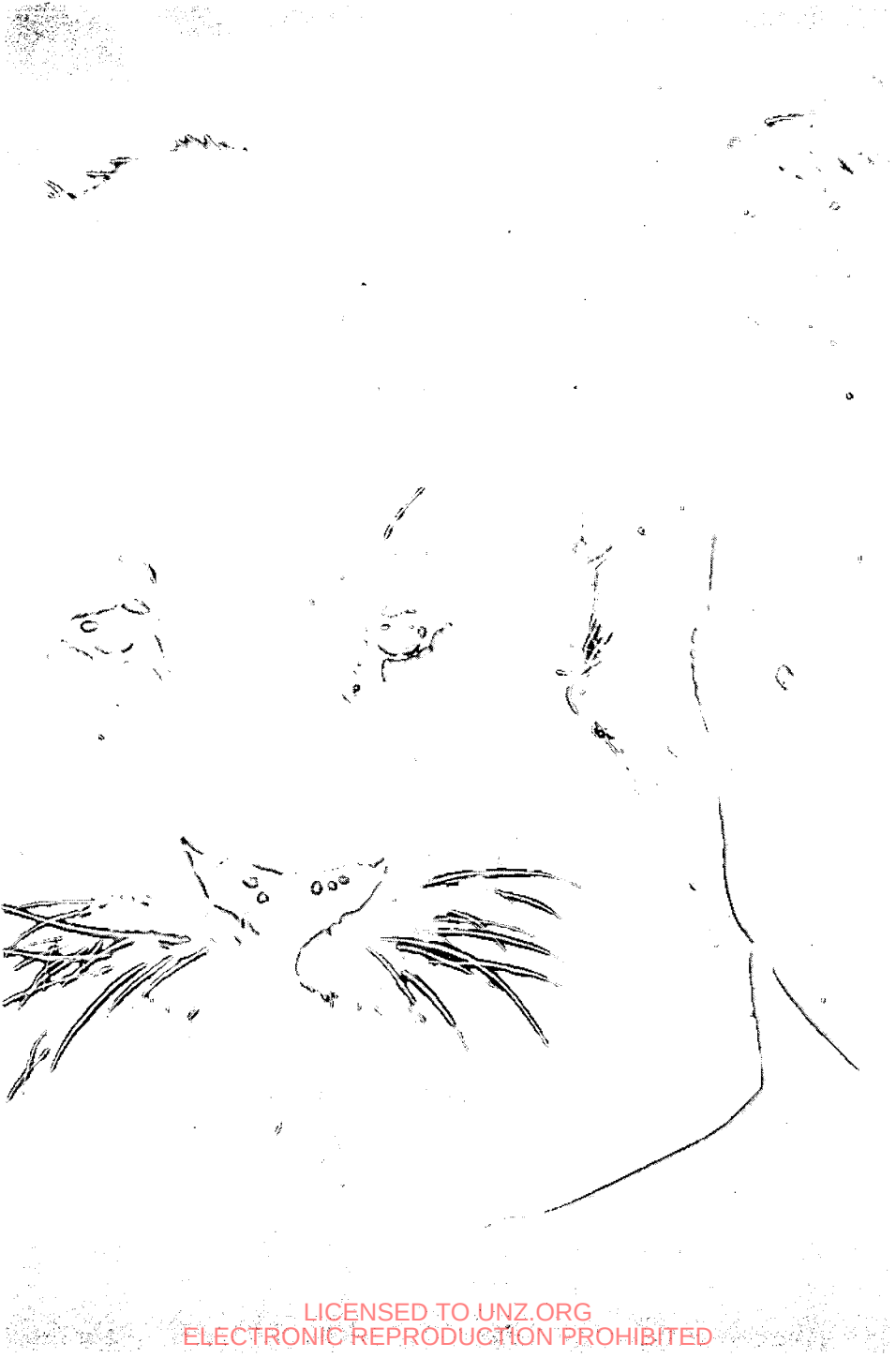

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The air in the boxcar was heavy with warm, rich smells: machine oil and damp fur. Tom Rome leaned back on his stool to catch the air that filtered in through the grating, balancing the stool on two legs against the motion of the train. Briefly he fumbled for a cigarette, then remembered: he didn't need them anymore. He liked the sound of that. "I don't need *anything* anymore," he said softly, so as not to waken the big cats, curled up asleep in their cage. They were so tightly wound together that it was hard, in the dim light, to know where one golden body left off and the other began. Rome watched the sleeping lioncels for a while, just stared at them and savored his amazement.

The cats were very beautiful, scaled-down lions with black manes, game animals bred to be hunted. Very beautiful, very cunning. More than cunning, Rome thought with satisfaction, more than anyone else in the world knew. As he stared at the cats, he thought he felt the touch in his mind again, the reaching. I don't need anything, anyone, he thought again. Except the lioncels. Everything was changed now.

He was not alone when he could touch another mind this way, really touch it, feel the fabric of it. In all the years he had worked with construct animals, Rome had never heard of such a thing. But it's true, he told himself. No more *alone*. That was the thing that had scared him for so long. Everyone was just damned alone, a stranger, no hope of touching anyone else or being touched. He had accepted that, had given up making the motions of friendship, had stopped waiting to feel included in the world. There was no sense in that, and, oddly, most people did not seem to notice what was so obvious to him, the isolation.

Now that he had the lioncels, that was changed. Something had punctured the isolation; he had felt their minds, and they felt his. He was no longer alone.

It had been a fleeting touch at first, a breath of alien sensation. Then today, locked in the boxcar with the animals, he knew the bond was completed, consuming, tasting of terror and sorrow and exultancy.

Now Rome, tilted back against the boxcar wall, savored the memory of that intimacy. It *is* possible, he told himself.

The door at the front of the closed car slid open, and the tractor driver sidled in. Rome pulled his gaze from the lioncels to focus on the man, seeing him from a distance.

"Y'r cargo comft'ble?"

"I guess." Rome nodded toward the tractor cabin. "Who's driving?"

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"It's on aut'matic. Call of nature." The driver gestured toward the lavatory at the far end of the boxcar. Rome nodded, waiting for the man to finish his business and leave him alone with the cats. But the driver stopped by the cage. "Damn good-sized, aren't they? How old?"

By rote, Rome answered. "Six months out of the tank. The Company keeps them that long so they can mature, get primed for the hunt. These here are special, cut from a line of lioncels bred for speed and brains, sort of top of the line." Maybe that's why, Rome thought. And: go away, just leave us alone.

The man turned his back on Rome and the cats and disappeared into the lav at the back of the car. "Katchen only wanted two of them? You'd think they'd order a lot."

"Lioncels are expensive. Katchen wants to see how good a kill they make before they order more." Rome felt the clenching in his guts that came when he thought about killing the cats, destroying the touch. He continued speaking. "The Company cloned three of them; the third was sold to some woman in Cairleigh for a pet."

The driver swayed back into the car, bracing himself against a sudden jerking motion. "Pet," he echoed. "Never see the day I can 'ford a pet like these here. Or go hunting at a Reserve like Katchen, either. Used to be in a School near a hunting reserve when I was a kid, though. Always wondered what they were like." Rome nodded absently. "Got you figured for a School brat too. Somethin' a'ways gives it away. No family?"

Go away, go away, Rome thought. "Relatives didn't want me," he said curtly.

The driver looked uncomfortable and did not reply. Fine, Rome thought. Go away. The tractor jerked the boxcars in serial contractions, and a look of relief passed over the driver's face. Rome knew that look. "Better get front 'gain," the man muttered. "See ya." He raised two fingers in a cursory salute and was gone. Rome relaxed.

Pax was stirring. The lioncels were the same size and color, but Rome thought of Pax as the larger, Ignis as the smaller of the two. The cat raised his head slowly, the movement a royal gesture, and looked down his nose at Rome. Rome felt himself reaching eagerly, grasping for the intimacy he had felt before, the strong sense of belonging. Encountering first that strong grief, Rome thought: I don't care. If I've taken the third cat's place in this circle, I don't care. If it's just luck that it was me, I'm glad. Even

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the raw pain of Pax's separation from Lux, the third of the lioncels, was a kind of pleasure to Rome, a part of the belonging.

Pax met Rome's mind with an image of a man, a hazy pale blur that had Rome's distinct scent and flavor. *Pale,* Pax thought at him, naming him. Already Rome knew that Pax thought of himself as Bronze, of Ignis as Gold. The third cat had been Tawn, and the thought of him was resonant with sorrow. There was no way to avoid the fierceness of that pain, and Rome did not want to. He sat, his head bowed and hands clenched, eyes filled with tears, trying to ride the sorrow through.

Peace, he thought at last. The lioncel's eyes dilated as he stared at Rome, his mind denying peace. Rome concentrated his own joy, the pleasure of their touch, trying to share it with the lioncel. *Peace, Bronze.*

The cat drew back its upper lip just enough to show teeth and dropped its head down again. Rome was again suffused with loss, and with inhuman perceptions of the space they shared, tumbling images and sensations:

> walls. bars. hunger. sour water. stench of men. stale air. Gold near, sleeping. Pale near. no Tawn. noises, motion, walls.

The sensations were tumbled into a well of feeling, a dark chaotic grief, and Rome wept again. All joy was consumed by hopelessness; as clearly as he saw the lioncel Pax stretched across the floor of the cage, black mane and golden body warm in the dim light, just as clearly Rome pictured Lux. Am I not welcome? he wondered. A surge of panic rose in him. They *must* welcome me, he thought. They can't break the connection. To go back to what I was, knowing this—He understood the lioncel's grief when he thought this way. And the thought returned to him, one he had been avoiding: when we reach Katchen, when the people at the hunting reserve loose the cats to be hunted on the veldt and killed, what will happen to me?

Peace, Bronze, he thought pitifully, pityingly. Ignis, the second lioncel, stirred from sleep, rolled to his feet with an easy motion, and began to pace nervously, infected with Rome's distress. *Peace,* the man thought at the cats. It was Pax's mind that answered his, and the answer was sorrow.

When the tractor-train reached the station in Katchen village, there was a representative from the Reserve, a dark woman who was obviously impatient with this chore and eager to return to Katchen Manor as soon as possible. She looked past Rome and went to the cats.

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"They look all right. Are they in good condition?"

Rome thought of the proud terror in the lioncels' minds and hated the woman, hated himself for answering her. "They're okay." It was his job, after all. "Where's the carrier?"

An old closed trailer was hooked up to a newer passenger car. Rome looked at the trailer and frowned; it would be tight for one animal, let alone two, and there were crumbs of rust on the floor and walls. Again he thought, it's my job. She wouldn't understand if I told her about them. All I'd get is grief for making problems, grief from the people at Katchen Manor, grief from the Company. He damned the woman and unhitched the lead thong from his waist, flipped the switch on the power pack at his hip, and unfurled the thong.

Pale. The touch of mind sent a cool shiver through him. Pax's mind promised obedience in return for dignity. No leash, no thong. Pride and dignity echoed in Rome's mind, together with something else that Rome could not define. The touch was enough. He put the lead back in its holster and turned the power off.

"Okay, Pax. Up." He opened the gate on the boxcar gangplank and waited for the lioncel.

Behind him, the woman from Katchen drew a terrified breath. "What the hell are you doing? You think this is a circus or something?" Her teeth were clenched tight around the words. "If one of them gets loose—"

"I know my job." Rome did not bother to look at her. There was no point in explaining. Probably she would not even listen, since she saw him as nothing but a cipher with a function. Fair enough. That was a role he had played well in the State School, in his training courses, in the ten years he had been working for Animal Constructs. "I know my job," Rome repeated flatly. The big lioncel stalked down one ramp and up the other into the trailer, stopping once to stare reproachfully at Rome. It was plain with each step that the cat complied by choice. Ignis followed after him, and Rome swung the trailer door shut.

"If they're that tame, how will they be any good for hunting?" The woman edged out from behind the passenger car while Rome locked the trailer. "We paid a lot of money for those cats, Mr. Rome. They're supposed to be special."

"They are. A little intelligence won't ruin them for your hunt." Rome finished with the lock and stalked toward the passenger car. He knew he was antagonizing the woman. I don't care, he thought. I don't need anyone anymore. Except—

"Did you have a bad trip out, Mr. Rome?" There was no sym-

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pathy in the woman's voice, only that impatience again. Rome reminded himself: you're a company man. The sight of papers on the dash reinforced that: receipt forms with the logo of Animal Constructs, three tiny golden cats on an azure field.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "The lioncels were a little restless on the way out here. There was a third cat—they don't like it when the clone-pride's broken up."

"Just so we don't have to goose them to get them going." Mollified, the woman slid in beside him and started the car.

It was a long drive out to the Katchen Reserve, over flat, harsh land, pale and shimmering in hot yellow sunlight. There were no trees, sparse brush, and a carpet of flattened, dry savannah grass: the cloudless sky was like a bowl enclosing the whole of the veldt. Rome turned away from the woman and closed his eyes. He slept, and his dreams resonated with the touch of an alien sensibility.

Rome spent the night in the staff quarters of the Katchen Manor House, dreaming fierce dreams, waking to reach out to the minds of the lioncels. Pax was wakeful, awaiting the contact, guarding the sleep of the gold lioncel, Ignis. Alone in the night quiet of the house Rome reached for inclusion, rested in the mind of the bronze cat, praising its beauty, its elegance in motion. At dawn he was awake, thinking of the link they shared, wondering again what would happen to him when the lioncels were killed out on the Katchen veldt. The link will break, he thought, tasting bile. It will cripple me; I can't go back, can't lose it.

His mind reached again for the lioncels, but not for comfort.

Run, Bronze, he warned, filling his thoughts with images of the open plain, reaching out to Pax where he was caged in the animal house. *When they set you loose, run.* He thought of the hunting copters, carriers filled with laughing tourists, high on shandal and ready to kill; he filled his mind with remembered scents of perfume, human sweat, the tangy smell of tar jack spilled from a hunter's flask, the ozone smell of charged guns; he thought of the sound of copter blades churning and tractors in motion. *Run.*

The answering touch came: *Help us, Pale.*

When he sat beside the driver from Katchen Manor that morning on his way back to the village and the tractor station there, Rome had already begun to consider the way to free the lioncels.

The company was loose about how long trainers could take to report back after a job. Rome counted on a day or two to think

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and act. He left Katchen Station on a rented motorbike and drove out to the eastern edge of Katchen Reserve.

Late afternoon sun flattened the veldt and shimmered on the curved bars that lined the Reserve's boundary. Rome peered down into the trench, fifteen feet across, that kept the animals from approaching the fence. The fence itself was only a few feet high, the bars set widely enough apart so that a man could squeeze through. It was the combination of in-curved barbs at the end of each stanchion and the trench itself that kept the animals on the reserve.

Bronze. Rome reached for the mind that had teased his at the Manor house and danced around his consciousness as he slept in the rooming house at Katchen Village. Does the distance weaken the bond? It must—it broke the bond with Lux, back at Cairleigh. How much distance did it take to break it completely?

In the midst of a growing panic he heard, *Pale.* For a moment, relieved, he was filled with a joy of running, an image of open land and the scattered motion of running prey. *Pale.*

I'm here, he thought. Come to me. *Bronze, escape.* He thought again of the hunters. *Find me. Help.*

Running. The cat's mind was full of pleasure. Rome sat down to wait, certain that they would find him.

It took almost an hour. As they ran, the cats would reach for him, fix his location. When he felt that they were nearby, Rome unpacked the folding ladder he had brought with him. Unfolded and reinforced, it stretched twenty feet and would bear the weight of two men. Or one lioncel. Rome struggled with the awkward length and weight of the ladder, managing to drop it over the barrier onto the ground at the far side of the trench. On his side he tied the ladder to two of the barbed fence spikes with cord. Then he sat down again to wait.

Pale.

Here, Bronze, he answered instantly. Can you find me? Now Rome thought of the cats trying to walk the ladder and had a moment of doubt. House cats climb all sorts of precarious things, but the lioncels, would they balk?

A wave of scorn accompanied an image of the big cats pacing fiercely across the chasm, balanced on the silvery ladder, as if to say, Don't you think we could do that? *Climb, Pale.*

He had felt them in his mind long enough so that he was almost suprised by the sight of the lioncels. *Pale* sounded in his head; he looked up and saw the cats were there. Ignis eyed the ladder, turned to his clone brother, and growled a protest. Pax batted

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him impatiently with a forepaw, and Ignis took his first step onto the ladder. It gave slightly and creaked as he put his full weight on it, but it held as he crossed. At the top the lioncel leaped, landed, and turned with neat formality to watch his brother cross the barrier.

Rome sat away from the fence on his motorbike, watching Pax balance along the ladder, moving like an acrobat. When the cat landed, he gave a deep growl of triumph that rang in the air and echoed in Rome's mind. *Free, Pale, free.*

That was all. The cats turned toward the east and began to walk. Rome watched, stifling the urge to call them back to him. The best thing would be for them to vanish on the veldt. They would live. He had saved them; that would have to be enough. The bond would break or keep, but they were alive. After all, he could always come back some day, Rome thought. Banishing a tiny edge of ill use, he sent them off with a thought of farewell. He received his own image back again: *Pale.*

Rome laughed; he had never felt more real, more brightly colored. Pale to the cats, perhaps, but *he* had saved them. He stayed long enough to watch the lioncels disappear into the darkening east; then gathered up his pack and went to disassemble the ladder.

He had decided not to return to Katchen Village. If the lioncels' disappearance had been noticed, he might be connected with it somehow. He had chosen a settlement south of the reserve, Cooley Station, as his destination. It was a few hours' ride; he could leave the motorbike there and catch a ride into the city.

Dark came in faster than he had expected. Rome rode for an hour before he began to worry. He had underestimated the distance and overestimated the bike, which wheezed, stuttered, and at last gave out altogether. Rome left it by the side of the road and began to walk. When he saw lights in the distance, he made for them, not sure they meant a town but hoping for a place to spend the night. The air had taken on a chill, and he was not dressed for the cold.

The lights came from the compound of a farm house: a series of walled yards, a barn, sheds, and the house itself. Rome entered the grounds cautiously, uncertain of a welcome, threading through the barnyard to another yard and then to the doorway beyond that. While he waited for an answer to his knock, he composed something to say, an explanation: My bike broke down; I was—I was exploring. I was mapping the stars. I was picnicking on the

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savannah, half a hundred miles from anywhere. I was setting free the beasts.

The man who stood in the light of the warm kitchen seemed to require no explanation, however. He wore a look of mingled curiosity and welcome, and when Rome began with the mention of his motorbike, the curiosity disappeared and only the welcome remained.

"Helen," the man called over his shoulder. "Someone to stay the night." As simple as that.

A reedy, smiling woman with skin tanned nearly as dark as her brown hair appeared from the hallway beyond the kitchen.

"I'm Tod Gerrong. This is my wife." Gerrong spoke with a slight accent. His skin was as deeply tanned as his wife's, but his hair was nearly white, bleached by the sun. Looking at him and at Helen Gerrong's neat, competent hands, Rome realized that the two of them were alone there. They ran the entire farm themselves.

"But have you eaten?" Helen Gerrong was asking. "Come, there's soup and bread and some cheese if you like. We don't see many people out here."

Rome followed her into the kitchen. The Gerrongs sat and chatted while Rome ate. Gerrong offered to look over the motorbike in the morning. As simple as that, Rome thought again. They open like this to a stranger out of the night. And then he thought, Why not? I'm the man who freed the beasts, not an ordinary stranger. That made him feel even better; he warmed to them, found himself talking and even laughing with them.

Later, settled in a small room upstairs, Rome stretched the length of the bed and, unable to resist, reached for the lioncels.

The rich green smell of night air filled him, the intoxicating feeling of freedom. *Pale*, like a whisper. Rome felt his body stretch in response to the lioncels' joy. Satisfied, he fell asleep.

It took him some time the next morning to locate the motorbike, since he had not kept strictly to the path. Tod Gerrong offered to go with him, but Rome decided to go alone. The man had work to do. And there was the chance to reach for Pax and Ignis, perhaps the last chance before he took the road to Cooley Station. Helen Gerrong made him a packet of bread and cheese to take with him and promised something heartier when he returned. She smiled when he left, as if she was responding to some joy she saw in him. I didn't remember that people smiled that way, Rome thought, leaving the compound. They never did before. Again he thought

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it was the cats that had changed him, and in the open he stopped, reaching for Pax's mind.

When the touch came, Rome was startled by the closeness and strength of it. *Pale.* A cunning, a triumph, satiation. The brassy taste and smell of blood. The cats had been hunting. Rome could still feel the thrill of victim's terror. *A kill.*

Swept up in the heady sensation of power, Rome stood silently on the veldt, his eyes closed. When the contact was broken, it took him a moment to get his bearings. He had no idea how long he had been in contact with the cats, feeling their elation. Rome remembered the motorbike ahead of him. He spat out the metallic taste in his mouth, something no longer pleasurable, and started walking. It took him another half-hour to find the bike and as long again to conclude that nothing he could do would fix it. Rome heaved the thing up on its wheels and began to push it toward the Gerrong's farm.

The farm yard was empty, bleached bone-color in the midday sun, when Rome pushed the bike into the barnyard, calling for Gerrong and his wife. No answer. No one in the barn. A few chickens fluttered in the kitchen yard, feathers skirling loosely. A smear of blood.

Before he found Gerrong and his wife, Rome knew what had happened. Guilt and sickness welled up in him. Fighting nausea, he made himself approach the bodies, close the eyes. The kitchen door had been splintered off its hinges. Tod Gerrong's body lay, mauled, across the floor. Helen Gerrong was halfway into the hall, her small hands contorted, reaching away. For help, Rome thought furiously. Sick, he pulled himself back to the door and stood there, shaking helplessly, reaching out: *Bronze.*

The mind that met Rome's was full of sleek satisfaction.

Bronze. Rome tore at the lioncel with the whole of his own pain and anger, with his guilt. He thought savagely of the two torn bodies in the house, of betrayal, of being used. Why did you do this? What had they done to you? What did *I* do to you?

The cats' hatred came like a blow: images of Lux, the lost brother; of time pacing in freight cars, in boxes and cages; of the sting of electrified leashes. The scent that filled his nostrils was his own, but it was disgusting, a stench, the smell of something hated. Rome gagged again. *Soft. Stupid.* The mind that touched his triumphed. *Pale.*

"Then why didn't you kill me!" He cried it aloud, desperately, in the silence.

The answer was an image of the pale one, a beacon and a

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warning among other men. Torn and broken bodies; a trail of them across the savannah, and none of them Tom Rome's. He had taken the place of Lux. *Pale.*

Rome sat in the dust of the kitchen yard, weeping.

It took hours to bury Gerrong and his wife. The ground nearest the house was packed and dry; digging any sort of grave was difficult. The sun was hot, and when dusk came, Rome was still digging. He did not mind the work, almost did not feel it. Don't let me think, he pleaded. When he had managed a grave and buried the Gerrongs, Rome closed the door to their house and went to sleep outside, in the walled kitchen yard. The thought of sleeping in the house brought back the sickness.

What woke him in the morning was not the sunlight but a consciousness of his own smell, a peculiar animal odor. He had slept in his clothes, sweaty and fouled by grave digging, and in the soot and dung of the kitchen yard.

They'll smell me if I go out this way, he thought. Then: Good. They'd know I was coming anyway. He did not wash. Sleep had given Rome a peculiar clarity of action. He went about the process of collecting things for his pack with deliberate calm; food, water, Gerrong's rifle, his own electric leash. Every moment he made a new decision about what to do when he found the lioncels. There was no answer; he knew only that he had to face them.

It was still hours before noon when Rome left the farm. When he stood in the gateway to the kraal, he allowed himself to reach out. *Bronze, Gold.*

Drowsy contempt. *Pale?*

It was enough. It gave him a direction to take. Rome went west, walking with a steady hypnotic rhythm. Every few miles he would reach out to the lioncels with his grief and pain. No anger, yet. The cats answered the pain with triumph, over him and over men. Sometimes there was a pungent memory of the taste of flesh, sometimes the memory of Lux.

Rome walked for hours, stopping sometimes to rest, drink from his canteen, or eat. Morning became afternoon and then early evening, and he still walked. The cats were playing a game with him, crossing and recrossing the veldt, weaving across his path. Their thoughts took on a kittenish malice when he touched for them. *Soft, Pale.*

Let me see you, Rome thought carefully. *Before I go.*

Go?

Rome thought of himself leaving, returning to Katchen Village, boarding the tractor-train for the city. He thought carefully of

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leaving behind the deadly intimacy of the lioncels, breaking the bond. Panic gripped him again at the thought, but he did not let that alter what he thought. *Go,* he repeated, fighting his own fear.

There was no answering feeling. Rome walking in the evening silence, wondering if the plan would work, how long it would take, when they would let him find them. The premonition of loss ached in him. I can't go back to the way it was. I can't be that man again. Even the price—

Pale.

When Rome looked up from the dust, the lioncels were silhouetted against the clear deep blue of the western sky, dark manes and golden bodies glowing in the last of the sun. They were very beautiful.

Pale. Stay. The lioncels moved closer to Rome, filling their thoughts with grief, with fear. *Stay.*

Ignis, the gold, was nearer Rome. His mind was not as focused as his brother's; it tasted less of revenge and more of the grass smell of the dusk. Ignis had little cunning in him, almost a gentleness that mingled with the fading memory of their kill.

Rome bit his lip and tasted the blood on his tongue. His mind filled with grief. Let them share that, as he had shared their grief for Lux. He made himself think, really think of what he had been before. The absolute loneliness he had made for himself, the loneliness of no common mind. His own heart contracted at the desolation; he thought of himself alone in the cities of man, where no mind would touch his again. The cats shifted back and forth uneasily, tails switching.

When Rome raised his rifle and shot Ignis, the lioncel dropped, too quickly dead to think of pain or surprise or anger. The broken link was like a roar in Rome's brain, mingled with the fury of the bronze cat.

Blood. Tearing and pain. Pale. *Between the paws, torn and dying. A great gaping hole, the loss.* Pale. *Better dead than so alone.*

The lioncel charged Rome, his mind roaring confused terror and rage. Rome raised his gun again and tore at the bronze lioncel with his own pain, his own fury. For a second they screamed, silently, at each other. Then Rome pulled the trigger, and the cat dropped to the earth, not fifty feet away. Pax died slowly, his mind grasping for Rome, clinging to his thoughts, vengeful and terrified as he tried to hold onto life through the man's eyes. When

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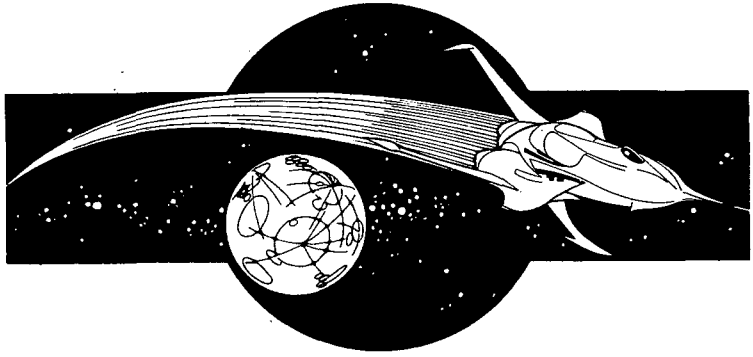
the cat was dead at last, Rome dropped to his knees, empty.

He might have been five minutes or five hours kneeling, his rifle thrown away in the dusty grass. The last of the sun was gone when he stood again and the air was chill. Rome turned away from the bodies of the lioncels and started south, toward Cooley Station. ●



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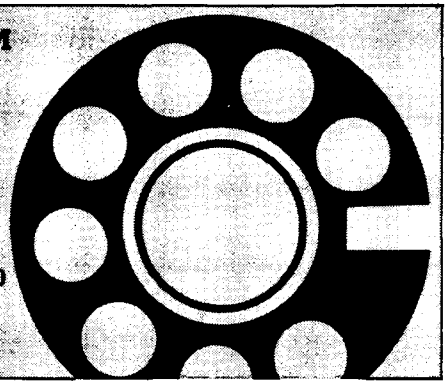

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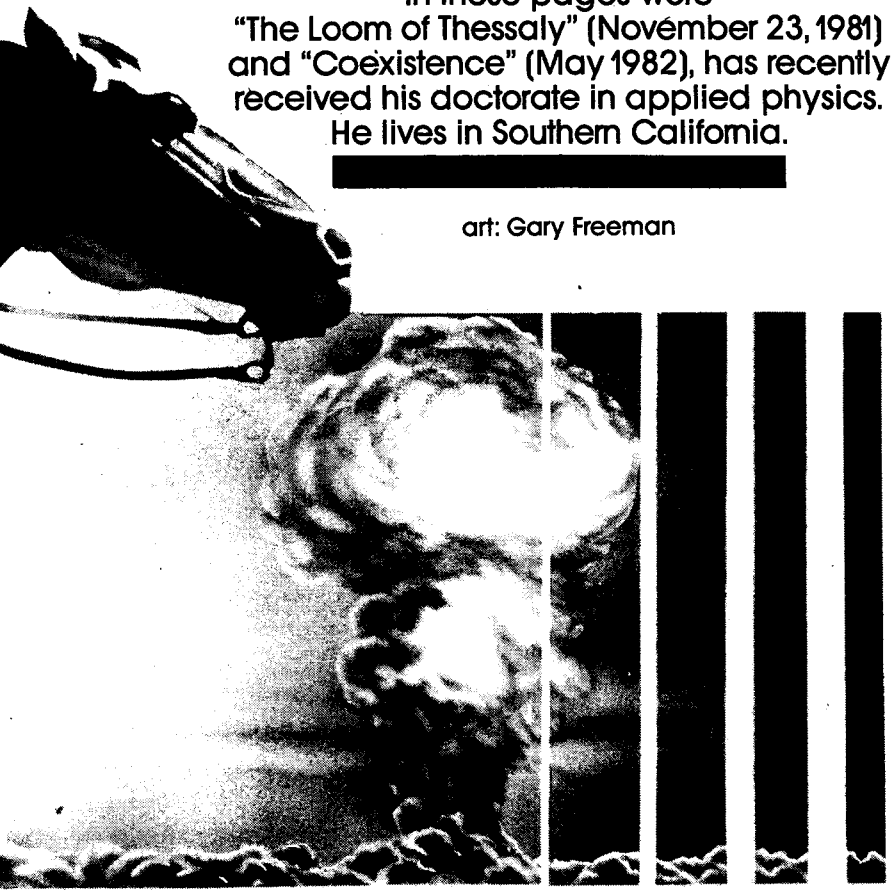
David Brin, whose previous stories in these pages were "The Loom of Thessaly" (November 23, 1981) and "Coexistence" (May 1982), has recently received his doctorate in applied physics. He lives in Southern California.

art: Gary Freeman



THE POSTMAN

by David Brin

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1

Once, long ago, Gordon Krantz had heard somebody contend that there was nothing more dangerous than a desperate man. There was no defeat so total that a determined person could not pull something from the ashes by negotiation . . . by risking all he had left.

Only an hour before Gordon had been well stocked, and as comfortable as a solitary traveller could expect to be these days. Now he was a fugitive, robbed and terrorized, scratched and torn from his frantic escape through the blackberry thicket.

From his hiding place, in a rock cleft surrounded by thick brush, Gordon could hear the sounds of looting taking place a few hundred yards down the mountainside. He tried not to listen to the delighted yells. They signalled the loss of gear he had spent years gathering. The thought was too painful to consider yet.

They had caught him off guard, sipping weak elderberry tea by his late afternoon campfire. It had been clear in that first instant, as they charged up the trail at him, that the raiders would as soon kill him as look at him. He snatched his belt and dove into the nearby brambles before they got close enough to choose.

He had cut his foot during that mad scramble and collected innumerable scrapes.

The fact that he had got away at all was as much a testament to his speed—preventing them from getting within knife range as they chuffed up the narrow path—as to the bandits' stinginess with ammo. They probably thought he had abandoned all of his goods, and his carcass was not worth a bullet.

Gordon allowed himself an ironic smile as he carefully replaced the moccasin on his injured foot. He had not left everything behind. As had been his habit even before the war, when he went on backpacking trips as a boy, he never spent a waking moment without his travel belt strapped on or within reach.

He was thankful for that old precaution as he picked up his revolver from a nearby rock and slid it back into its holster. He clutched a nearby rock outcrop to help himself stand up.

The happy sounds were fading now. The bandits were leaving. He heard a few derisive calls, obviously designed to taunt the victim, who had got away with his life, but little more. Then there was silence.

He had, indeed, got away with very little more than his life. Even that last part was in doubt, since he had no supplies.

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Gordon had already decided. He had no choice but to follow the raiders. Something might occur to him. They might abandon some of his goods. Turning away would be turning toward death in the wilderness.

As he picked his way back toward the trail as quietly as he could, Gordon checked his inventory. Besides his holstered pistol, the hip pouches on his belt held his scout knife, a few days' concentrated rations, his compass, first aid packet, space blanket, a miniature fishing kit, and ten spare rounds of ammunition. He silently blessed those small relics of industrial civilization.

Unfortunately, these were still paltry gleanings from a disaster. All considered, Gordon's chances of survival had easily been halved.Those chances had, of late, seemed quite slim enough.

Gordon moved as quickly and silently as he could through the bone-dry forest. He began to see the outlines of a plan forming—to cut above the main trail and, traversing the east slope of the mountain, to come down upon his opponents while it was still light . . . while they were still gloating over their acquisitions, carelessly contemptuous of the man they had robbed.

The bearded, denim-clad men had taunted him as he escaped through the bramble, calling him "brer rabbit" and promising to eat him if he ever returned. Gordon wasn't entirely sure they had been joking about the last part. He had seen cases of cannibalism in the early days. Some of these mountain men might have acquired a taste for the "long-pork." One thing he thought was pretty certain. The marauders probably thought he was unarmed. That was Gordon's slim advantage.

His own survival depended on his ability to catch up with his robbers and to persuade them that a man with nothing to lose was someone to be reckoned with. If he could show them how far he was willing to go, they might let him have back some of his goods—perhaps enough to keep him alive in the wild mountains of what had once been the state of Oregon.

He had on a shirt, jeans, camp slippers, and socks. The loss of his jacket was a major disaster. As he moved quickly down the trail, Gordon couldn't avoid all of the sharp stones and sticks that covered the trail. His left foot throbbed every time it was poked. Moccasins would get him nowhere. He had to have his boots back, at least!

Gordon cautiously entered the small clearing that had been his campsite. There was next to nothing left.

They had made litter of his tent, ripping it into tiny pieces of nylon and aluminum. Apparently the robbers had no use for it,

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and had destroyed out of malice whatever they didn't want to carry. The only things of value the robbers had left intact were the slim longbow Gordon had been carving and his experimental line of gut strings.

Although it had been one and a half decades since the fall of industrial civilization, ammunition for firearms had only recently begun to get scarce; there had been so much around before the war. Gordon's enemies were apparently men of little imagination. When they seized everything else at his campsite, they had failed to see the value of the bow and strings.

His shotgun and ammo, boots, jacket, geiger counter, and his slim, crab-written diaries were all gone, along with his food supply, of course. Carefully prepared pemmican . . . some split grains his last appreciative audience had donated . . . his tiny hoard of rock candy, which he had found in an abandoned gas station vending machine.

It was just as well he had lost the candy. His tooth brush was lost, too, trampled in amidst the trash the bandits had left in his campsite.

If he survived this day's disaster, Gordon swore he would find another toothbrush. In his travels he had seen too many once pearly smiles that had been ravaged by neglect. The idea of his own teeth rotting in his mouth was Gordon's personal phobia. He was a fastidious anomaly in a world of ever-growing barbarism and decay.

Even limping, he was able to move silently and quickly. That was the only advantage camp moccasins had over boots. Soon he could hear the raiding party below him, laughing over the morning's escapade.

Gordon carefully considered his recollection of yesterday's hike up this same trail. He thought he could remember the perfect site for a bushwhack. There was a switchback that passed beneath a horseshoe-shaped rocky outcrop. A sniper could easily break brush just above that turn and position himself within point-blank range of anyone hiking along the hairpin.

Gordon kept a close watch on the foliage on the left side of the trail. When he came to a slope that promised a fast shortcut to the south, he broke through the scrub oak, leaving the path and breaking his own trail. If he could get to the ambuscade first, he might be able to pin them down from the start and force a negotiated withdrawal.

That was the advantage of being the one with little to lose. The

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bandits would probably prefer to live to rob another day. It was easy to believe that they would part with boots, some food and ammo, a blanket and a geiger counter in order to save the lives of one or two of their number.

Gordon was willing to snipe now and live with himself later. In sixteen years, he had yet to kill a man that he knew of—though he had fired at dim figures early on, as a volunteer in the militia. That had been back when there *was* still a militia and a National Guard.

The voices of the party on the trail faded with distance. There was no way he could catch up with them in a straight chase, when they were on a trail and he was breaking ground cross country. Also, there wasn't much time left before nightfall.

Gordon decided to gamble on a shortcut. He concentrated on finding the quickest way southwest, toward the rocky overhang he remembered. Soon he was in a thick undergrowth. The sun was hard to find, through the trees. He had to pause frequently to check his compass.

Grimly, he kept on. He didn't remember the trail very well from yesterday, but it seemed that the switchback came only after a sweep southward along the face of the mountain. It presented him with a quandary. To stand a chance of catching his adversaries, he had to stay above them. Yet if he went too high, he might go right past them.

He chose a direction and persevered.

But soon the gamepath turned slightly westward, into a pass to the south of the one he had camped in. It appeared to lead to another route upward, toward the Divide, where the Cascade range changed from semi-arid forest to the rain-drenched climate of the coast.

He stopped a moment to catch his breath. The other side of the pass had been Gordon's goal before the robbery. He looked at the slight mist that gathered in the pass above. Once he was over the Divide he need never again worry about scarce or poisoned water, or the desert sun. There might be salmon to fish . . . and there might be a semblance of civilization.

Gordon shook his head, driving out the temptation to abandon the chase. For certain there would be rain and snow over that range, along with predators and the threat of starvation. He *had* to have supplies!

He began angling downslope a bit. Surely by now the main trail was quite a bit below him, if it hadn't already switched back a few times. He surprised a flock of wild turkeys as he entered a

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small clearing: one more sign that he had come into wetter country. It was also an indication of how far wildlife had recovered from the overhunting of the first postwar years, now that the human population had been thinned. How useful his bow someday might become, should he live long enough to finish and perfect it.

Now the game path was definitely turning west. The switchback had to be below, if not behind him. Gordon drifted downslope when he could, but the path forced him to continue west through the undergrowth.

Suddenly he stopped. His ears picked up something.

Gordon hurried along the path until the steepness of a ravine caused the forest to open up around him. Now he could see the mountain, and the other mountains of the chain, wrapped in a thick summer haze. The sound was coming from below, and to the northeast.

Voices. Gordon peered, then saw the trail. He caught a glimpse of color moving upward, slowly, through the woods.

The bandits! But why were they moving uphill? They wouldn't, unless Gordon was already far south of the trail he had taken the day before. He must have missed the ambush site altogether.

If the vandals had taken a fork he failed to notice yesterday, they were now climbing back toward . . . Gordon looked up the mountain. Yes, he could see how a small hollow could fit over to the west, on a shoulder near the lesser used pass. It would be defensible and very hard to discover by chance.

Gordon turned west. If he hurried, he might beat the bandits to their base by five minutes or so. Perhaps he could take some women at the hideout hostage. The image struck him as grossly unpalatable, far less pleasing than the plan of ambushing his own ambushers.

Still, what choice had he? There wasn't a decent ambush site. It would be too easy to outflank him on this broad hillside.

He started to run, leaping over the shorter scrub and fallen trees. Gordon felt exuberant as he coursed through the forest. He was committed, and none of his typical introspection or self-doubt would get in the way now. The battle adrenaline made him almost high. Running, he stretched to leap over a decayed trunk into a summer-dry creekbed. But the instant he landed, a sharp pain lanced through his left foot and streaked up his left leg.

He barely caught himself as he fell. Sudden tears filled his eyes. He grabbed the trunk and lowered himself to the ground. Some-

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thing had stabbed him in the foot, through the flimsy camp moccasins he wore.

For several minutes he had to sit there, massaging his foot until the cramps slowly subsided. Meanwhile, he could hear the sounds of the bandit party passing below, taking away the head start that had been his only advantage.

Nightfall wasn't many hours away. The "space blanket" in his pouch didn't seem like much protection against the cold. He had little faith in something that, folded in its plastic bag, measured about the size of a cupcake.

As he stood up, carefully, leaning on the bow, Gordon's eye was caught by a sudden flash. Something glinted amidst the trees, across the narrow pass.

He could see the object to the southeast, or rather he could see its reflection. From the folds in the hillsides, Gordon guessed that it could not be seen by anyone standing too far from this very spot, and then only in the late afternoon. The forest was thick over there on the other side of this saddle, and the hillsides gathered closely around. The many forest fires that had seared this dry part of the Cascades since the war seemed to have spared that mountainside.

Above the reflection, along the ridgeline above, Gordon could see the faint outlines of an old road or firebreak. This had been National Forest, before the war. But even then there had been people hereabouts.

So. That had to be the hideout, not the hollow to the west.

The voices of the passing gang fell away into the hazy mountainside. Gordon listened until he was sure they were gone. Then he relaxed enough to begin thinking again. He had to come up with another plan.

Gordon went slowly, nursing his injured foot and listening carefully for an ambush. If he read his enemies right, their pickets would be close to home, if they maintained any at all.

Unfortunately, there were many more side paths than in the other pass. Gordon had to choose among several likely tracks. He couldn't make out footprints in the gravelly soil, especially in the fading light of the dying afternoon. The sun had already passed behind the mountain to the southwest. He visualized his destination, a ravine on the opposite shoulder of the saddle. He chose a trail that began to swing once more to the east.

He climbed into the thick forested hollow where he had seen

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the reflection earlier. Gordon guessed that he was within a half-mile of his goal, and slightly higher in altitude, when the path failed. It was growing dark fast. Gordon had to push through undergrowth, peering about for hazards to his feet. He regretted the loss of his flashlight. It was probably the last working electric light on this side of the Divide. The handpowered novelty had been a gift from his brother just before the war.

Groping and blundering, Gordon kept his forearms in front to protect his face from the dry brush as he poked about for the quietest approach. He fought down the urge to cough in the floating dust. The evening chill was coming on. Still, Gordon shivered less from the cold than from nervousness. He knew he was nearing his destination. One way or another, Gordon felt he was about to have an encounter with Death—his own or somebody else's, perhaps both. Gordon hadn't wanted his Dharma to come to this.

He had chosen to become a minstrel, a travelling actor and laborer, partly because he wanted to keep moving, to search for a haven where someone was trying to put things back together again, his personal dream. But he also couldn't stay in one place because many of the surviving postwar communities demanded that a new male member prove his skill at killing before being allowed to join. He might have to duel-kill for the right to sit at the communal table, or bring back the scalp of a member of a feuding clan. Many survivor outposts had adopted rituals in which he wanted no part.

Now he found himself counting the bullets he had for his revolver and noting that there were probably enough for all the bandits. It was a grim mental exercise for a man who thought of himself as one of the last Humanists. He told himself this was different, that it was self-defense, but a part of him still protested.

Gordon detoured around another sparse berry patch. What the thicket lacked in fruit, it made up for in thorns. He moved along its edge, careful in the gray twilight.

Gordon thought it a miracle that a man like him had lived this long. Everyone he had known or admired when he was a boy was dead, along with virtually every hope any of them had had. The soft world that had encourage dreamers broke apart when he was seventeen. Long ago he realized that his brand of persistent optimism had to be a form of hysterical insanity.

Gordon paused at a small blob of color. About a yard into the nearby bramble, a solitary clump of blackberries hung, apparently missed by the local black bear. Ignoring the stabbing thorns, Gordon reached in to pick a few and popped them into his mouth.

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He savored the wild, tart sweetness and wished it had not been so long since he had been with a woman.

Twilight was almost gone. Gordon made slow progress in the gathering gloom, even as the chill made him yearn to hurry up and get it over with. He finally rounded the thicket. There, suddenly, he saw the glint of a glass window only a hundred feet away.

Gordon ducked back behind the thorns. Breathing deeply, he pulled his revolver and checked the action to be certain no dirt was caught in the mechanism. He touched his breast pocket to make certain his spare ammo was ready. His hand was shaking.

Am I really going to go through with this?

A hazard to quick or forceful motion, the thicket was soft and yielding to his muscled back as he settled against it. Gordon closed his eyes and meditated for peace, for calm, and for forgiveness. In the chilly darkness, the only accompaniment to his breathing was the rhythmic ratchet of the crickets. A swirl of cold fog blew around him.

He sighed. There's no other way. He raised his weapon and swung around to face death.

The structure looked odd. The distant patch of glass was dark.

That was strange, but stranger still was the silence. He'd have thought the bandits would have a fire going, that they would be celebrating their successful robbery.

The glass reflected silvery highlights of a rolling cloud cover. Thin wisps of haze drifted between Gordon and his objective, confusing the image, making it shimmer. Gordon walked forward slowly, giving most of his attention to the ground. If they could afford to feed one, the bandits would surely have a dog, or several. Now was not the time to step on a dry twig or to be stabbed by a sharp stone as he stumbled in the dimness.

He glanced up, and once more the eerie feeling struck him. There was something very odd about the structure. It didn't look right. Its upper section seemed mostly glass. Below, it looked like painted metal. At the corners . . .

The fog grew thicker. Gordon could tell his perspective was wrong. He had been looking for a house or a large cottage. As he neared, he realized that the thing was closer than he had thought. The shape was familiar, somehow.

His foot came down on a twig. The "snap!" filled his ears as he crouched, peering into the gloom, desperate to see.

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The ragged fog fell open before him. Pupils dilated, Gordon suddenly saw that he was bare meters from the window; he saw his own face reflected upon its surface, wide-eyed and wild haired; and he saw, superimposed on his own image, a vacant, grinning death mask—a hooded skull smiling in welcome.

Gordon crouched, hypnotized, unable to move or make a sound. A superstitious thrill coursed up his spine. The haze slowly swirled as he listened for proof that this was really happening—wishing with all his might that the death's head was an illusion.

"Alas, poor Gordon!" The sepulchral image seemed to shimmer a greeting as it overlay his reflection. Gordon's frozen mind could think of nothing but to attend the figure's bidding.

Finally, he exhaled and he heard it whistle between his teeth. Without willing them to, Gordon felt his eyes turn slightly from the visage of death. A part of him noted that the window was part of a door. The handle lay before him. To the left there was another window. To the right . . . to the right was the hood.

The hood of the Jeep. The hood of the abandoned, rusted Jeep that lay in a faint rut in the forest. The hood of the abandoned, rusted Jeep with ancient US Government markings and the skeleton of a poor dead civil servant within, skull pressed against the passenger-side window, facing Gordon.

The strangled sigh Gordon let out felt almost ectoplasmic, the relief and embarrassment was so palpable. Gordon forced himself to straighten up and felt as if he were unwinding from the fetal position. He moved his arms and legs, then slowly began to pace around the vehicle, obsessively glancing back at its dead occupant. His heartbeat settled, and the adrenaline roar gradually ebbed.

He walked around the vehicle four times, then sat down on the forest floor against the cool door on the left side. Shaking slightly, he put the revolver back on safety and slid it into its holster. Then he pulled his canteen and drank with slow, full swallows. Gordon wished he had something stronger than water.

The night was full upon him. The cold was chilling, but Gordon spent a few moments putting off the obvious. The Jeep was, at minimum, shelter for the night. Fnally the cold made him admit that now was the time to use that shelter.

The latch operated after a stubborn moment. He had to pull hard to pry the rusted door open. It let out a screech, but Gordon didn't care. He slid over onto the cracked vinyl of the seat and inspected the interior.

The Jeep was one of those backward, driver on-the-right types

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the post office had used. The dead mailman—what was left of him—was slumped on the far right. Gordon avoided looking at the skeleton for the moment.

The back was half-full of canvas sacks. The smell of old paper and the musky odor from the mummified remains filled the small cabin. Gordon snatched up a metal flask he found on the floor. It sloshed! To have held liquid for sixteen years it had to be closed tightly. Gordon swore as he twisted and pried at the cap. He pounded it against the door frame. On the verge of tears, he finally felt the cap give slightly. He redoubled his efforts and was rewarded with a slow, rough turning and the heady, distantly familiar odor of whiskey.

Gordon decided that he must have been a good boy after all and that there was indeed a God. He took a mouthful and almost coughed as the warming fire streamed down his esophagus. He took two more small swallows and fell back against the seat, gasping for breath.

He was unwilling to face the task of removing the jacket the skeleton wore. Let it wait until daylight, he thought. Gordon grabbed sacks from the rear and bundled them about him. They bore the imprint US POSTAL SERVICE on them. He left the door open just an inch to let in the crisp mountain air. Burrowing under the sacks with his bottle, Gordon drifted into a semi-slumber, waking from time to time to take a sip from the bottle.

Gordon finally looked over at his host and contemplated the American flag patch on the arm of the civil servant's jacket. He unscrewed the flask for another swig. This time he raised the container toward the hooded garment.

"Believe it or not, Mr. Postman," he said, "I always thought you folks gave good and honest service. I was proud of you all, even before the war. But this, Mr. Mailman, this is service beyond anything I'd come to expect! I consider my taxes very well spent!"

He brought the flask to his mouth and drank to the postman, then screwed the cap back on and settled deeper into the mail sacks. Gordon felt a sad poignancy come upon him, like homesickness. The Jeep, the symbolic, faithful letter carrier, the flag . . . they reminded him of comfort, innocence, cooperation, and the easy life that had once allowed millions of men and women to relax, to smile, to be tolerant with one another.

Today, Gordon had been ready to kill and be killed. He smiled, glad that that had been averted. They had called him Mr. Rabbit and left him to die. But he would call the bandits "countrymen" and let them have their lives.

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Gordon allowed sleep to come, welcoming back the optimism he had thought he'd lost. He lay in a blanket of his own honor and spent the rest of the night dreaming of parallel worlds.

2

A camp robber bird, looking for jays to chase, landed on the hood with a hollow thump. It squawked, once for territoriality and once for pleasure, then began poking through the thick detritus with its beak.

Gordon awakened to the tap-tapping sound and looked about, bleary-eyed. He looked at the bird through the dust-smeared window and took time to remember where he was. The glass windshield, the steering wheel, the smell of metal and paper felt like a continuation of the dream he had had most of the night, a dream about the Old Days, before the war. Then memory of the events of yesterday settled in.

Gordon rubbed his eyes and began to consider his situation. If he hadn't left an elephant's trail on his way into this hollow last night, he should be perfectly safe right now. The fact that the whiskey had been here untouched for sixteen years obviously meant that the bandits were lazy hunters. They had never even fully explored their own mountain.

Unaccustomed to eighty-proof liquor, Gordon felt a little thick-headed. The war had begun when he was seventeen, a young college prodigy, and since then there had been few opportunities to build up a tolerance to alcohol. The whiskey had left him cotton-mouthed and a bit scratchy behind the eyelids.

He regretted his lost comforts. There would be no tea this morning, no damp washcloth, no hearty breakfast of venison jerky, and, especially, no toothbrush. Gordon tried to be philosophical: after all, he was alive.

He had a feeling there would be times when each of the items stolen from him would fall into the category "missed most of all." If the gods still favored him, he would never feel that way about the geiger counter.

Radiation had been one of his main reasons for going ever westward since he left Minnesota, five years before. He had grown tired of walking everywhere with his precious counter, always afraid it would be stolen. Everyone knew the west coast had been spared the worst of the nuclear catastrophe. The seasonal winds had blown true to form, from west to east, that year. While the

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Conelrad stations were still broadcasting, Gordon and his fellow survivors had learned of the streaks of fallout that speared eastward from Vandenberg, in California, and the Puget Sound Trident pens. But a thoughtful look at a map made it clear that the Pacific coast was still better off than the Midwest. The deadly rains expected from Asia had somehow never come in force.

The war had been fought mostly with death rays and death bugs, anyway. The former eradicated the space stations with surgical effectiveness. The latter destroyed the last semblances of civilization and governmental control. The plagues were well constructed, at least. Gordon gave their designers that much. After a year most of the viruses had passed a built-in time limit and either disappeared or become benign. Still, Gordon had fled several times from villages where strangers were shot at on sight, as potential carriers.

Gordon pushed aside the mail sacks that had been his blankets. He opened his left belt pouch and pulled out a small package. It was wrapped in aluminum foil that had been coated with melted wax.

If there ever had been an emergency, this was one. Gordon would need energy to get through the day. A dozen cubes of bouillion and a chunk of rock candy were all he had.

Sucking on a broken-off piece of the hard sugar, Gordon kicked open the door of the Jeep. He dropped several of the mail sacks out onto the ground to get them out of the way.

He got out and circled around to look at the muffled skeleton that had shared the night with him.

"Mr. Postman," he said. "I'm going to give you as close to a decent burial as I can manage. I know that's not much recompense for all you're giving me. But it's all I have to offer."

The rusty door groaned as he pulled it open. Holding an emptied mail sack out to catch the skeleton as it pitched forward, Gordon managed to get the bundle of clothes and bones laid out on the forest floor. Gordon was amazed at the state of preservation. The dry climate had almost mummified the postman's remains. The other contents of the Jeep appeared to have been free from mold for sixteen years.

An inventory was in order before he started digging a grave. First he checked the mailman's apparel. The jacket was a wonderful find. If big enough, it would improve Gordon's chances of survival substantially. The footgear looked old and cracked, but it might fit. They had once been rugged work shoes. Gordon carefully shook out the dry remnants of skin and bone and laid them

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against his moccasins. They looked just a little large. Too bad the postman's socks were beyond redemption. The shirt and pants seemed all right, though they were stiff and musty. Gordon slid the bones out of the clothing and onto the mail sack with as little violence as he could manage, all the time a little surprised at how easy it was. It seemed that all of his superstition had been used up the night before. All that remained was a mild reverence for and an ironic gratitude to the corpse.

He carried the treasures over to a Jeffrey pine, shook them vigorously, holding his breath against the dust, and hung them on a branch to air out.

On the floor below the driver's seat was a large leather carrier's sack. It too was dry and cracked in spots, but the straps held when he tugged on them, and the flaps looked as if they'd keep out water. Gordon laid it outside, near the precious flask of scotch. He pried open the glove compartment. A brittle map he found replaced the one he had lost.

With a joyful shout, Gordon grabbed a small cube of clear plastic from under a pile of papers. It was a scintillator! Far better than his geiger counter, the little crystal would give off tiny flashes whenever gamma radiation struck it. It needed no power. Gordon cupped it in front of his eye and watched as a sparse set of flickerings told of cosmic ray background flux. Otherwise, the cube was quiescent.

Now what was a prewar mailman doing with a gadget like that? Gordon wondered. He put the scintillator into his pants pocket and returned to the glove compartment.

The flashlight was a dead loss. The emergency flares were crumbling. He tossed two of them over onto his salvage pile. The tool kit had many items that would make good trade somewhere, but the weight of the metal made it unrealistic to carry more than a few pieces, which he carefully selected.

A scattering of small packages spilled from the leather carrier's bag. Gordon decided he might as well empty the bag right now. It wouldn't come close to replacing his lost Kelty, but it would be a vast improvement over nothing at all.

He opened the flaps and upended the bag. Bundles of aged correspondence spilled out, breaking into scattered piles as brittle rubber bands snapped apart. Gordon picked up a few of the nearest pieces.

"From the office of the mayor of Bend, Oregon, to the Chairman of the Department of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Oregon, Eugene." Gordon intoned the address as if he were play-

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ing Polonius. He flipped through more letters. The addresses sounded pompous and archaic.

"And Dr. Franklin Davis, of the small town of Gilchrist writes—with the word URGENT printed clearly on the envelope—a rather bulky letter to the Director of Regional Disbursement of Medical Supplies . . . no doubt pleading priority for his requisitions."

Gordon's sardonic smile faded into a frown of concentration as he turned over one letter after another. Something was wrong here.

He had expected to be amused by junk mail and personal correspondence, but there didn't seem to be a single advertisement in the bag. And while there were many private letters, most of the envelopes were official stationery.

Well, he really didn't have much time for snooping anyway. He would have to get organized, decide on a plan, and act soon if he wanted to eat. Perhaps now was the time to begin relearning the art of arrow-making.

He would take a dozen or so letters for amusement, and use the backsides of the letters for his new journal. He hadn't allowed himself to feel the loss of sixteen years' tiny scratchings, which was now doubtless being perused by some bandit.

As he selected a few letters to stuff back into the bag, the sense of something unexpected returned to Gordon. The mix of addresses bothered him. Too many were labeled URGENT. It made Gordon wonder.

What was a US Postal Service Jeep doing out here, anyway? And what had killed the postman?

Gordon got up and went around to the back of the vehicle. There were bullet holes in the tailgate window, well grouped midway up toward the right side. Gordon looked over to the Jeffrey pine. Yes, the shirt and jacket each had two holes in the back of the upper-chest area. He hadn't noticed them before because of the number of other stains and rips.

Gordon looked at the skeleton, skewed and jumbled on its mail sack. Logic narrowed the range of possible explanations considerably. The attempted hijacking or robbery could not have been prewar. Mail carriers, if he remembered correctly, had almost never been attacked, even in the late eighties rioting. Besides, a missing carrier would have been searched for until found. So the attack took place *after* the three-day holocaust. But what was a mailman doing driving alone through the countryside after the

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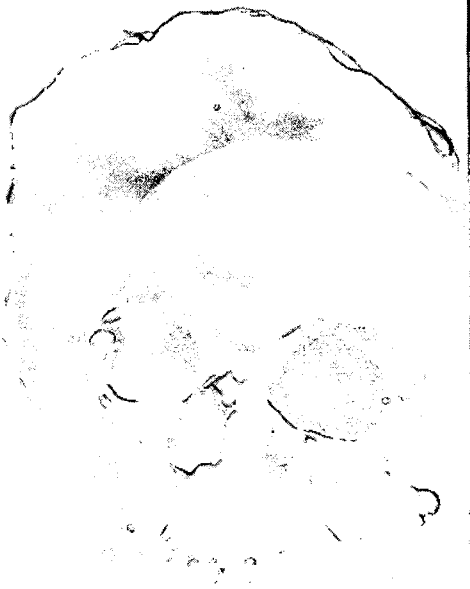

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United States had effectively ceased to exist? How long after had this happened?

The fellow must have driven off from his ambush, then sought the most obscure roads and trails to get away from his assailants. Perhaps he was unaware of the severity of his wounds. Perhaps he had simply panicked. But Gordon suspected that there was another reason the letter carrier had chosen to weave in and out of blackberry thickets to hide.

"He was protecting his cargo," Gordon thought. "He measured the chance that he'd black out on the road against the possibility of getting help and decided to save the mail rather than try to live."

So, this was a bona fide postwar postman, hero of the flickering twilight of civilization. Gordon thought of the oldtime ode of the mails . . . "Through rain, snow, sleet . . . " and wondered at the fact that some had tried this hard to keep the light alive.

That explained the official letters and the lack of junk mail. Gordon hadn't realized that even a semblance of normality had remained after the first bombs.

Of course, as a seventeen-year-old recruit with his militia unit, Gordon had been unlikely to see anything normal. The mob rule and general looting in the main disbursement centers kept armed authority busy until the militia finally vanished into the disturbances it had been sent to quell. If men and women elsewhere were behaving more like human beings during those months of horror, Gordon never witnessed it.

The brave story of the postman served only to depress Gordon. This hint of a short-term struggle against chaos, by mayors and university professors and postmen, had a "what if" flavor that was too poignant for him to consider for long.

Gordon found himself touching the bullet holes in the rear window. He forced himself to stop it and instead to pry open the tailgate. It opened reluctantly, but finally Gordon could begin moving mailsacks aside, looking for useful items. He found the letter carrier's hat with its tarnished badge, then an empty lunchbox. He snatched up a valuable pair of sunglasses lying in a thick layer of dust on a wheel well.

Amongst the heavier tools that lay jumbled in the storage compartment above the rear axle, Gordon found a small shovel. Intended to help free the four-wheel drive vehicle from ruts in the road, it would now help to bury the driver.

Just behind the driver's seat, under several heavy sacks, Gordon found a smashed guitar. A large-caliber bullet had snapped its

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neck. Near it, a large yellowed plastic bag held a pound of desiccated herbs that gave off a strong, musky odor. Gordon barely remembered the smell: marijuana.

He had envisioned the postman as a middle aged, balding, conservative type. Gordon now recreated the image and made the fellow look more like himself: a member of a sub-generation that had hardly begun to flower before the war snuffed out it and everything else optimistic, a neo-hippie dying to protect the establishment's mail. It didn't surprise Gordon. He had had friends who were part of the movement, before the Chaos. They had been sincere people, though a little strange. Their motto had been cooperation and selflessness—in rejection of the egotism of the eighties. A neo-hippy would have been susceptible to the mystique of the Post.

Gordon threw the guitar out the tailgate and resumed searching.

The letter carrier hadn't even been armed! Did he really believe he was inviolable? Gordon remembered reading once that the US Mail operated through both sides of the lines for three years into the 1860s Civil War. Perhaps the postman had been a pacifist. Perhaps he had trusted his countrymen to respect tradition.

Post-Chaos America had no tradition but survival. In his travels, Gordon had found that some isolated communities welcomed him in the same way minstrels had been kindly received far and wide in medieval days. In other cases there were wild varieties of paranoia. Gordon had learned to read the subtle clues that told which hamlet would welcome strangers. Fewer than half spoke before shooting.

Even in those rare cases where he had found friendliness, where decent people seemed willing to welcome a stranger with a steady hand and a good heart, Gordon had always, before long, found himself ready to leave. Whenever he stayed in one place for very long, he began to dream of wheels turning and things flying in the sky. After about a year in one place, he generally found himself moving on.

By midmorning he had decided. His gleanings were sufficient to make the chances of survival better without a confrontation with the bandits. The sooner he was over the pass and into a decent watershed, the better off he would be.

Someday, when he was resupplied and confident, he would return to claim his property.

He would bury the postman and take the guitar strings and

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sunglasses. Nothing else in back of the Jeep would serve him half so well as would a stream, somewhere out of the range of the bandit gang, where he could fish for trout to fill his belly.

3

". . . They said fear not, Macbeth, 'til Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane; and now a wood comes to Dunsinane!

"Arm, arm, arm youselves! If this is what the witch spoke of—that thing out there—there'll be no running, or hiding here!"

Gordon clutched his wooden sword, which he had contrived earlier from an old piece of planking and a bit of tin. He motioned to an invisible aide-de-camp.

"I'm getting weary of the sun and wish the world were undone.

"Ring the alarum bell! Blow, wind! come wrack! At least we'll die with harness on our back!"

Gordon squared his shoulders, flourished his sword, and marched Macbeth offstage to his doom.

Out of the glare of the tallow lamps, he swiveled to catch a glimpse of his audience. They had loved his earlier acts. But this bastardized one-man version of *Macbeth* might have gone over their heads, in spite of his bowdlerizations and simplified verses.

To be honest, a lot of the "updated" parts had been changed because Gordon couldn't remember the original. He'd most recently seen a copy of the play a decade ago. The last lines of his soliloquy had been canon, at least. The part about "wind and wrack" he would never forget.

Those in the front row began applauding enthusiastically the instant after he made his exit; they were led by Mrs. Adele Thompson, the leader of this clan. The younger citizens clapped awkwardly. Those below twenty years of age slapped their hands together as though they were taking part in this strange rite of group appreciation for the first time in their lives.

Grinning, Gordon jumped onto the makeshift stage to take his bows. The stage was a plank-covered garage lift in what had once been the only gas station in the tiny hamlet.

Driven by hunger and isolation, Gordon had gambled on the hospitality of this mountain village, with its fenced fields and stout log wall. The gamble had paid off. His initial welcome had been cordial, with a minimum of suspicion. His offer of a series of performances in exchange for his meals had passed by a fair majority of the voting adults of the village.

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"Bravo! Excellent!" Mrs. Thompson stood in the front row, clapping enthusiastically. White-haired and bony but still robust, she turned to encourage the thirty-odd others, including small children, to show their appreciation. Gordon did a flourish with one hand and bowed deeper than before.

His performance had been pure crap, but he was probably the only person within a hundred miles who had once studied drama. There were "peasants" once again in America, and, like his predecessors in the minstrel trade, Gordon had learned to go for the unsubtle.

Timing his final bow for the moment before the applause began to fade, Gordon again left the stage. He removed his crude, slapped-together costume. He had set firm limits. There would be no encore. His stock was theater, and he meant to keep them hungry for it until it was time to leave.

"Marvelous. Just wonderful!" Mrs. Thompson greeted him as he joined the villagers, now gathering at a buffet table along the back wall. The people were making a festival of the event. The older children formed a circle around him, staring in wonderment.

"Thank you, Mrs. Thompson. I appreciate the kind words of a perceptive critic, especially when it's so long between performances."

"No, no seriously," the clan leader insisted, as if Gordon had been trying to be modest. "I haven't been so delighted in years. Wow! That last bit with Macbeth sent shivers down my spine! I only wish I'd watched it on TV back when I had a chance. I didn't know it was so good!

"And that inspiring Abraham Lincoln speech you gave us . . . well, you know, we tried to start a school here, in the beginning. But back in the early days it just didn't work out. We needed every hand, even the kids', and it seemed no one had the heart. Well, that speech got me to thinking. We've got some old books someplace. Maybe . . . "

Gordon nodded politely. He had seen this syndrome before. It was the best of a half-dozen types of reception he had experienced over the years, but it was also among the saddest. It always made him feel a little bit like a charlatan when his shows brought out grand, submerged hopes in one of the decent older people who remembered better days, hopes that had always fallen through before a week or a month had passed. It was as if the seeds of civilization needed more than good will and the dreams of aging high-school graduates to water them. He was no travelling mes-

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siah. The symbols he offered would not give the hopeful the sustenance they needed to overcome the inertia of a dark age.

Gordon was spared hearing more of Mrs. Thompson's plans. The crowd that surrounded him squeezed out a small, silver-haired black woman, wiry and leather-skinned, who seized Gordon's arm with a friendly but viselike grip.

"Now, Adele," she said to the clan matriarch, "Mister Krantz hasn't had a bite since noontime. If we want him well enough to perform tomorrow night, we'd better feed him, hmmm?"

Mrs. Thompson gave the other woman a look of patient indulgence. "Of course, Patricia," she said. "I'll speak with you more about this, later, Mr. Krantz, after Mrs. Howlett has succeeded in fattening you up a bit. She gave Gordon an intelligent, ironic smile. Gordon reevaluated his initial impression of Adele Thompson. She certainly was no fool.

Mrs. Howlett siezed Gordon's arm and propelled him through the crowd. Gordon smiled and nodded as hands came out to touch his sleeve. Wide eyes followed his every movement. One of those watching him was a young woman who stood behind the long buffet table. She had hair blacker than Gordon remembered ever seeing before, and deep almond eyes. She was barely taller than Mrs. Howlett. Twice, she turned to slap the hand of a child who tried to help himself to the banquet before the honored guest. But each time she quickly looked back at Gordon and smiled.

Beside her, a tall, burly red-haired man man stroked his short red beard and gave Gordon a strange look of resignation.

"Abby," Mrs. Howlett addressed the pretty brunette. "Let's have a little bit of everything on a plate for Mr. Krantz. Then he can make up his mind what he wants seconds of. I baked the blueberry pie, Mr. Krantz."

Dizzily, Gordon made a diplomatic note to himself to have two helpings of the pie. It was hard to concentrate on politics, though. He hadn't seen or smelled anything like the buffet before him in years! There was a large stuffed turkey. A huge steaming bowl of boiled potatoes, dollied up with beer-soaked jerky, carrots, and onions, was the second course. Down the table Gordon saw apple cobbler and a barrel of dried apple flakes. He would have to cozzen a supply of those before he left.

Not bothering with further inventory, he eagerly held out his plate. Abby kept her eyes on him as she took it.

The red-haired man suddenly muttered something indecipherable and reached out and grabbed Gordon's right hand with both of his own. Gordon flinched, but the taciturn fellow would not let

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go until he answered the grip and shook hands. The man then nodded and let go. Blushing slightly he bent down to kiss the brunette quickly and stalked off, eyes downcast. Gordon blinked. Did I just miss something, he wondered as he took back his heaped plate. The girl blushed prettily as he thanked her.

"That was Abby's husband, Michael," Mrs. Howlett said. He stayed to see your show, but now he's got to go and relieve Edward at the trap string, so Edward can bring back what he's caught and dried over the last week. He wanted to stay to see your show, though. I think when he was little, he used to love to watch shows . . . "

Gordon was in a daze as the steam from his plate rose to his face. Mrs. Howlett rattled on beside him as he found a seat on a pile of old tires and proceeded to stuff himself.

"You'll get to talk to Abby later," the black woman went on. "Now, you eat. And when you get a little less hungry, I think we'd all like to hear, one more time, how you got to be a mailman."

Gordon looked up at the eager faces around him. He hurriedly took a swig of beer to chase down a too-hot mouthful of potatoes.

"I'm just a traveller," Gordon said around a full mouth while lifting a turkey drumstick. "It's not much of a story, how I got the bag and clothes." Gordon shrugged. He didn't care whether they stared or touched or talked to him so long as they let him eat!

Mrs. Howlett smiled and watched him for a few moments. Then, unable to hold back, she started in again. "You know, when I was a little girl, we used to give milk and cookies to the mailman. And my father always left a little glass of whiskey for him the day before New Year's. Dad used to tell us that poem—you know, "Through sleet, through mud, through war, through blight, through bandits and through darkest night . . . ' "

Gordon coughed and looked up from his plate for a moment, astonished and delighted by the old woman's misremembrance. But the impulse faded quickly as he returned to his slab of roast turkey and stuffing. He hadn't the will to try to figure out what the old woman was driving at.

"*Our* mailman used to sing to us!"

The speaker was a dark-haired giant with a silver-streaked beard. His eyes seemed to mist as he remembered. "We could hear him coming, on Saturdays when we were home from school, sometimes when he was over a block away. He was black, blacker than Mrs. Howlett or Jim Horton over there. Man, did he have a nice voice! He brought me all those mail-order coins I used to collect.

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Ringed the doorbell so he could hand 'em to me, personal, with his own hand."

His voice was hushed.

"Our mailman just whistled when I was little," said a middle-aged woman. She sounded a little disappointed. "But he *was* real nice. Later, when I was grown up, I came home from work one day and found out the mailman had saved the life of one of my neighbors—heard him choking and gave him mouth-to-mouth until an ambulance came."

There was a collective sigh from the circle of listeners, as if they were hearing the heroic adventures of a single ancient hero.

"Now," Mrs. Howlett touched Gordon's knee. "Tell us again how you got to be a mailman."

Gordon shrugged again, a little desperately. "I just found the mailman's things."

"Ah," Several of the villagers looked at each other knowingly and nodded, as if Gordon's answer had had some profound significance. Gordon heard his own words repeated to those on the edges of the circle.

"He found the mailman's things . . . so naturally he became . . . "

Gordon shrugged. His answer must have appeased them, somehow. The crowd thinned as each villager took his or her polite turn getting a plateful from the buffet. It wasn't until much later that Gordon, on reflection saw the significance of the transaction that had taken place while he crammed himself nearly to bursting with good food.

4

" . . . we found, then, that our clinic seems to have an abundant supply of disinfectants and pain killers of several varieties. We hear these are in short supply in Bend, and in the relocation centers up north. We are willing to trade some of these—along with a truckload of de-ionizing resin columns that happened to be abandoned here—for one thousand doses of tetracycline, to guard against the bubonic plague outbreak to the east. Also, we are in desperate need of . . . "

The mayor of Gilchrist must have been a strong-willed man to have persuaded his local emergency committee to offer such a trade. Hoarding, however illogical and uncooperative, had been one of the worst contributors to the collapse after the war. He was

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astonished that there were people with this much good sense, still, during the first two years of the Chaos.

Gordon rubbed his eyes. Reading wasn't easy by the light of a pair of homemade candles. But he found it difficult to get to sleep on the soft mattress. And he'd be damned if he'd sleep on the floor after all these months of dreaming of just such a bed, in just such a room!

He had been a little sick earlier. The home-brewed ale he had consumed had almost taken him over the line from delirious happiness to utter misery. He had teetered along the boundary for several hours before stumbling into the room they had prepared for him.

There had been a toothbrush waiting on his nightstand and an iron tub filled with hot water. There had been soap! In the bath his stomach had settled, and a warm, clean glow spread over his skin.

Gordon had smiled when he saw that his postman's uniform had been cleaned and pressed. It lay on a nearby chair; the rips and tears he had crudely patched were now neatly sewn.

He could not fault the people of this tiny hamlet for neglecting his one remaining longing. He was almost in Paradise.

He lay in a sated haze between a pair of elderly but well-maintained sheets, waiting for sleep to come as he read an ancient piece of correspondence between two dead men.

"We are having extreme difficulty with local gangs of 'Survivalists,'" the mayor of Gilchrist went on.

"Fortunately, these tiny infestations of egotists are too paranoid to band together. They're as much trouble to each other as they are to us. Nevertheless, they are becoming a real problem.

"Our deputy is regularly fired on by well-armed men in army surplus camouflage suits when he tries to patrol outlying roads. No doubt the idiots think he's a 'Russian Lackey' or some such nonsense. They've taken to hunting game on a massive scale, killing everything in the forest and doing a typically rotten job of butchering and preserving the meat. Our own hunters frequently come back disgusted over the waste and often having been shot at without provocation.

"I know it's a lot to ask, but when you can spare a platoon from relocation riot duty, could you send them up here to help us root out these self-centered, hoarding, romantic scoundrels from their little filtered armories? Maybe a unit or two of the US Army will convince them that we won the war and have to cooperate with each other from now on . . ."

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Gordon put the letter down.

Yes, that's the way it had been. The "last straw" had been this plague of 'survivalists.' One of Gordon's last duties in the militia had been to help snuff out some of those small gangs of city-bred cutthroats and gun nuts.

The number of fortified caves and cabins his unit had found in the mountains had been staggering, all set up in a rash of paranoia in the decade before the war. Of course, such prizes changed hands a dozen times each in the first months; they were such tempting targets. The battles had raged until every solar collector was shattered, every windmill wrecked, and every cache of valuable medicines scattered.

Only the ranches and villages, those possessing a more sensible brand of paranoia mixed with internal cohesiveness, survived. When the Guard units themselves dissolved into roving gangs of battling survivalists, few of the original population of armed and armored hermits remained alive.

There was a faint sound. Gordon might almost have imagined it. Then, only slightly louder, came a faint knock on his door.

"Come in."

The door opened about halfway. Abby, the petite, vaguely Oriental-looking girl he had seen earlier, smiled timidly from the opening. Gordon refolded the letter and slipped it into its envelope.

"I've come to ask if there is anything else you need," she said, a little quickly. "Did you enjoy your bath?"

"Oh, boy." Gordon sighed. He found himself slipping into MacDuff's brogue. "That I did, lass. And in particular I appreciated the toothbrush."

"You mentioned you'd lost yours." She looked at the floor. "I pointed out that we had at least five or six unused ones in the storage room. I'm glad you were pleased."

"It was your idea? Then I am indeed in your debt."

Abby looked up at him and smiled.

"Was that a letter you were just looking at? Could I look at it? I've never seen a letter before."

Gordon laughed. "Surely you're not that young! What about before the war?"

Abby blushed at his laughter. "I was only four when it all happened. It was so frightening and confusing. I really don't remember much from before."

Had it been that long? Yes. Sixteen years was long enough to

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have beautiful women in the world who knew nothing but the dark age.

"All right, then." He patted the bed, near his knees. Grinning, she came over and sat beside him.

Gordon reached into the sack and pulled out one of the yellowed envelopes. Carefully, he spread out the letter and handed it to her.

Abby looked at it so intently that he thought she was reading the whole thing. She concentrated, her thin eyebrows almost coming together in a crease on her forehead. But finally she handed the letter back, saying, "I guess I can't really read. I mean, I can read labels on cans and stuff. But I never learned sentences."

She sounded embarrassed but unafraid, trusting, as if Gordon were her confessor.

He smiled. "No matter. I'll tell you what it's about."

He held the letter up to the candlelight.

"It's from one John Briggs, of Fort Rock, Oregon, to his ex-employer in Klamath falls. I'd guess from the lathe and hobby horse letterhead that Briggs was a retired machinist. Hmmm."

Gordon concentrated on the barely legible handwriting. "It seems Mr. Briggs was a pretty nice man. Here he's offering to take in his ex-boss's children until the emergency was over. Also he says he has a good garage machine shop, his own power, and plenty of metal stock. He wants to know if the fellow wants to order any parts made up, especially of things in short supply . . . "

Gordon's voice faded. He was still so thick-headed from his excesses that it had just struck him that a beautiful female was sitting on his bed. He cleared his throat quickly and went back to scanning the letter.

Abby looked at him. Apparently half of what he had said about the letter writer, John Briggs, might as well have been in a foreign language to her. "Metal stock" and "machine shop" could have been ancient, magical words of power.

"Why didn't you bring us any letters here in Pine View?" she asked.

Gordon frowned at the non sequitur. The girl wasn't stupid. One learned how to tell such things. Obviously she was quite bright.

Then why had everything he said, when he arrived here and at the party, been completely misunderstood? She still thought he was a mailman, as, apparently, did all but a few of the others in this small settlement. From whom did she believe they might get mail?

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Probably she didn't realize that the letters he carried were from dead men and women to other dead men and women and that he carried them for . . . for his own reasons. The myth that had spontaneously developed here in Pine View depressed Gordon. It was one more sign of the deterioration of civilized minds.

He considered telling her the truth, as brutally and frankly as he could, to stop this fantasy once and for all. He started to.

"There aren't any letters because . . . " He paused. Once more he was aware of her nearness, the scent of her hair, and the gentle curves of her body. Of her trust, as well. He sighed. "There aren't any letters for you folks because . . . because I'm coming west out of Idaho, and nobody back there knows you here in Pine View. From here I'm going to the coast. There may even be some large towns left, down there. Maybe . . . "

"Maybe someone down there will write to us if we send them a letter first!" Abby suggested. "Then, when you pass this way again, on your way back to Idaho, you could give us the letters they send. By then I'll be able to read sentences, I promise!"

Gordon shook his head and smiled. It was beyond his right to dash such dreams.

"Maybe so, Abby. Maybe so. But you know, you may get to learn to read easier than that. Mrs. Thompson's offered to put it up for a vote to let me stay on here for a while. I guess officially I'd be schoolteacher, though I'd have to prove myself as good a hunter and farmer as anybody. I could give archery lessons. . . "

Abby looked at him with surprise. Then she shook her head vigorously.

"But I thought you'd heard! They voted on it after you went to take your bath. Mrs. Thompson should be ashamed of trying to bribe a man like you that way, with your important work having to be done!"

He sat forward, not believing his ears. "What did you say?" He had begun hope he could stay in Pine View for at least the season, maybe a year. Who could tell? Perhaps here the wanderlust would leave him, and he could find a home.

Gordon fought to stifle his anger. Abby apparently noticed his agitation and hurried on.

"I mean, that wasn't the only reason, of course. There was the problem of there being no woman for you. And then . . . " Her voice trailed off so that Gordon could barely hear her. "Mrs. Howlett thought you'd be ideal for helping me and Michael finally have a baby . . . "

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Gordon blinked. "Um," he said, expressing the full contents of his mind.

"We've been trying for five years. We really want children. But Mrs. Horton thinks Michael can't because he had the mumps really bad when he was twelve. You remember the real bad mumps?"

Gordon nodded. It had been the last of the warbugs. The resultant sterility had made for unusual social arrangements everywhere he had travelled.

Abby went on quickly. "Well, it would cause problems if we asked any of the other men here to—to be the body father. I mean, when you live close to people like this, you have to look on the men who aren't your husband as not being really 'men' . . . at least not that way. I don't think I'd like it, and it might cause trouble. Besides, I'll tell you something if you promise to keep a secret. I don't think any of the other men would be able to give Michael the kind of son he deserves. He's really very smart. He's the only one of us youngers who can *really* read . . . "

The flow of strange logic came on too fast for Gordon to follow.

"But you're different." She smiled at him. "I mean, even Michael saw that! He's not too happy, but he figures you'll only be through once a year or so, and he could stand that. He'd rather do that than never have any kids."

Gordon cleared his throat. "You're sure he feels this way?"

"Oh, yes. Why do you think Mrs. Howlett introduced us in that funny way? It was to make it clear without really saying it out loud. Mrs. Thompson didn't like it much, but I think that's because she wanted you to stay."

Gordon's throat felt very dry. "How do *you* feel about all this?" he asked.

She looked at him as if he were a visiting prophet.

"I'd be honored if you'd say yes," she said quietly. She lowered her eyes.

"And you'd be able to think of me as a man, 'that way'?" Gordon asked.

Abby grinned, then answered Gordon by crawling up on top of him and planting her mouth upon his. The intensity of her assault was testimony enough.

There was a momentary pause as she shimmied out of her clothes. Gordon turned to snuff the candle on the bed stand. Beside it lay the gray letterman's uniform cap. Its brass badge cast multiple reflections of the dancing flame. The figure of a man,

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hunched forward upon a horse with bulging saddle bags, seemed to move at a flickering gallop.

"This is another one I owe you, Mr. Postman," Gordon thought, as Abby's smooth skin slid along his side. He blew the candle out.

5

For ten days, Gordon's life followed a new pattern. As if to catch up on six months' lack, he slept late. Each morning Abby awoke before dawn. She was gone, like the night's dreams, when he opened his eyes to the sunshine that streamed in through his window.

During the day he conferred with Mrs. Thompson and the other village leaders, gave reading and archery lessons, and prepared for the evening's performance. Each night, by the time he had delivered his last soliloquy and led the adults in a group sing of beloved old commercial jingles, he would come to wonder if Abby had been a dream.

Each night she came to him after he retired. She sat on the edge of his bed and talked of her life. She brought him books to ask their meanings. And then, when her active mind seemed sated, she slid under the covers while he took care of the candle.

On the tenth morning, she did not slip away with the predawn light but instead wakened Gordon with a kiss.

"Hmmmn," he commented, as he reached for her. Abby pulled away. She leaned over for her clothes, brushing her breasts across the soft hairs of his flat stomach; then she sat up and smiled at him.

"I should let you sleep, but I wanted to tell you something," she said. She held her clothing in a ball.

"Mmm, what is it?" Gordon raised his head a little and stuffed the pillow behind it for support.

"You're supposed to be going today, aren't you?"

"Yes, Abby. That would be best. I'd like to stay longer, but since I can't, I'd best be heading west again. Besides, there are circumstances that make it hard to delay any longer, as I'm sure you're aware."

"I know." She nodded seriously. "We'll all miss you here. But . . . well, I'm going to meet Michael out at the trapline this evening. I miss him terribly. That doesn't bother you, does it? I mean, it's been wonderful here with you, but he's my husband and . . . "

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Gordon smiled. He touched her cheek. To his amazement, he had little difficulty. He was more envious than jealous of Michael. He had long become accustomed to a self-image of denial.

Abby's and Michael's desire for children and their obvious love for each other made the situation, in retrospect, as obvious as the need for a clean break at the end. He only hoped he had done them the favor they sought, for despite their fantasies, it was unlikely he would ever be this way again.

"I have something for you," Abby said. She reached under the bed and pulled out a small silvery object on a chain, and a paper package.

"It's a whistle. Mrs. Howlett says you should have a whistle. Also, she helped me write this letter. I found some stamps in a drawer in the gas station, but they wouldn't stick on. So I got some money. I think this is fourteen dollars. Will that be enough?

Gordon couldn't help smiling. Yesterday, five or six of the others had privately approached him. He had accepted their small packages and payments for postage. He might have used the opportunity to charge them something he needed, but the community had already supplied him with a month's stock of jerky, dried apples, and twenty straight arrows, newly produced from the assembly line he had shown them how to build.

Some of the older citizens had relatives in Eugene or Portland or towns elsewhere in the Cascades. It was the direction he was heading, so he took the letters. A few were addressed to people who had lived in Oakridge and Blue River. Those he filed deep in the safest part of his sack. The rest he might as well throw into Crater Lake, for all the good they would ever do.

He seriously pretended to count out a few paper bills, then handed her back the rest of the worthless faded currency. "And who are you writing to?" Gordon asked, as he took the letter. He felt as if he was playing Santa Claus, and he enjoyed it.

"I'm writing to the University. You know, at Eugene? I asked a bunch of questions like, are they taking new students again, yet? And do they take married students?" Abby blushed. "I know I'd have to work on my reading real hard to get good enough. And maybe they aren't recovered enough to take many new students. But by the time I hear from them maybe things will be better. I'll for sure be reading by then. Mrs. Thompson promises she'll help me, and her husband has agreed to start a school. I'm going to help with the little kids."

Gordon had thought himself beyond surprise. But this touched him. In spite of Abby's totally unrealistic estimate of the state of

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the world, Gordon felt warmed by her hope. He found himself dreaming along with her. He saw no harm in wishing.

"Actually," Abby went on. "One of the big reasons I'm writing is to get a . . . a pen pal. That's the word, isn't it? Maybe someone in Eugene will write to me. That way we'll get letters here. Also, that will give you another reason to come back, in a year or two . . . besides maybe wanting to see the baby."

She smiled. "I got the idea from your Sherlock Holmes play. That's an 'ulterior motive,' isn't it?"

She was so delighted with her own cleverness and so eager for his approval that Gordon felt a great, almost painful rush of love and tenderness for her. Tears welled as he reached out and pulled her into an embrace. He held her tightly and rocked slowly, his eyes shut against reality, and breathed in, with her sweet smell, an optimism he had thought gone from the world.

"Well, this is where I turn back." Mrs. Thompson said, shaking hands with Gordon. "Down this road things should be pretty tame until you get to Davis Lake. Our boys cleared out the last of the old survivalists that way some years back, but I'd still be careful."

The straight-backed old woman handed Gordon an old road map.

"I had Jimmie Horton mark the places we know of where homesteaders have set up. I wouldn't bother any of them unless you have to. Mostly they're a suspicious type, likely to shoot first. We've been trading with the nearest only for a short time now."

Gordon nodded. He folded the map carefully and slipped it into its pouch. The alterations he had made to the leather shoulder pack would make it more appropriate for cross-country travel.

He felt rested and ready. He would regret leaving Pine View as much as he had any haven in recent memory. But he was becoming eager to see what had happened in the Columbia Valley.

In the years since he had left the wreckage of Minneapolis, he had found himself moving westward into ever wilder territory, encountering increasingly hostile signs of the dark age. But now he was in a new watershed. Oregon had once been a pleasant place, with well dispersed light industry, productive farms, and an elevated level of culture. Perhaps it was merely Abby's innocence infecting him, but he told himself that the Columbia Valley would be the place to look for civilization, if it existed anywhere.

He held the old woman's hand once again.

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"Mrs. Thompson, I'm not sure I could ever repay what you people have done for me."

She shook her head. "No, Gordon, you paid your keep. I would have liked it if you'd been able to stay, and help me get a school going. But now I see maybe it won't be so hard to do myself.

"You know, we've been living in a kind of a daze these last years, since the crops have started coming in well, and the hunting's come back. You can tell how bad things have got when a bunch of grown men and women who once had jobs and filled out their own taxes and read news magazines start treating a battered wandering play-actor as if he was something like the Easter Bunny. Even Jim Horton gave you a couple of letters to deliver, didn't he?"

Gordon gave Mrs. Thompson an embarrassed sidelong glance. Then he burst out laughing. The relief of having the group fantasy lifted off his shoulders made his eyes fill.

Mrs. Thompson chuckled. "But it was harmless, I think. And more than that. You've served as a . . . is catalyst that old word? Anyway, the children are already exploring ruins for miles around, bringing me books they find. I won't have any trouble making school into a privilege. Imagine, *punishing* them by suspending them from class! I hope I handle it right."

"I wish you the best of luck, Mrs. Thompson." Gordon said sincerely. "God, it would be nice to see a light here and there in all this desolation."

She looked thoughtful. "Right, son. That'd be bliss."

Mrs. Thompson sighed. "Now you come back again, hmm? I'd recommend you wait a year, but come on back. You're discreet and you're kind. You treated my people, especially Abby and Michael, real well." She frowned momentarily. "I *think* I understand what went on back there, and I guess it's for the best. Anyway, you're always welcome back."

Mrs. Thompson turned to go. She walked two paces, then paused and half-turned to look back at Gordon.

"You aren't really a postman, are you?"

Gordon smiled. "If I bring back some letters, you'll know for sure."

She nodded, then waved and set off up the ruined asphalt road.

Gordon watched her until she passed the first turn. Then he came about to face the west, and the long downgrade toward the Pacific.

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6

The barricades had been long abandoned. The main baffle on highway 58, at the east end of the town of Oakridge, had weathered into a tumbled mass of concrete debris and curled, rusting steel. The town itself was silent. This end at least was clearly long abandoned.

Gordon looked down the main street. The signs were clear. The town had tried to hold out. Two, possibly three pitched battles had been fought. A storefront with a sign reading "Emergency Services Clinic" was the center of a major circle of devastation.

Three unsmashed panes reflected morning sunlight from the top floor of a hotel. Elsewhere, even where store windows had been boarded, the prismatic sparkle of shattered glass glistened.

Just twenty yards from his vantage point Gordon saw the wreckage of a gas station. The mechanic's tool cabinet lay on its side; its store of wrenches, pliers, and replacement wiring lay scattered on the floor.

Gordon knew Oakridge to be the worst of all possible Oakridges, from his point of view. The things needed by a machine culture would be available everywhere, untouched and rotting, implying there was no such machine culture. At the same time he would have to pick through the wreckage of fifty waves of previous looters to find anything of use to him.

Well, he had done it before. He had even sifted the downtown ruins of Boise once. The gleaners who had come before him had missed a small treasure trove of canned food in a loft behind a shoe store—some hoarder's stash, long untouched. There was a pattern to such things, worked out over the years.

Gordon slipped down off the baffle on the forest side. He entered the overgrowth and zigzagged, just in case he had been watched.

At a place where he could verify three landmarks, at diverse angles, Gordon dropped his leather shoulder bag and cap. He took off the blue carrier's jacket and laid it on top, then cut brush to cover the cache. He carried his bow, .38, and a cloth sack.

He started with houses on the outskirts. Sometimes the first generation of looters were more exuberant than thorough. The wreckage they left discouraged those who came after, but there could be useful items within.

By the time Gordon reached the fourth house, his sack contained a pair of boots almost useless with mildew, a magnifying glass, and two spools of thread. It wasn't much. He had looked in all the usual hoarder's crannies—and some unusual ones—but

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hadn't found food of any sort. His Pine View jerky wasn't entirely gone, but he had dipped down almost to the level set aside for emergencies.

The pace he had set had not allowed for much hunting or fishing. His archery was better, and he had bagged a pair of birds a few days before. But if he didn't have better luck gleaning, he might have to give up on the Columbia Valley for the season and find a semi-permanent hunting camp.

Gordon stood beside the four-poster bed in what had once been a physician's prosperous two-storey home. The attic, a frequent source of useful junk, had been picked clean. it was a maelstrom of scrapbooks and papers, but there wasn't an old shoe or out-of-style coat in sight.

The bedroom appeared empty of all but furniture, but there Gordon thought, for the first time, he might have found something the earlier looters had missed.

The large, heavy area rug that lay upon the hardwood floor seemed out of place. The left two legs of the bed rested upon it. The right pair did not. It was as if the owner had purposely placed the carpet in an awkward position.

Gordon laid down his burdens, grabbed the edge of the rug, and lifted. He crouched to curl the end and started rolling it toward the bed.

Yes! There was a square crack in the floor under the carpet. One leg of the bed pinned the rug over one of two brass hinges.

He stood and heaved against the bedpost. The leg hopped up, then fell back with a boom that echoed through the house. Twice more he pushed, and twice more loud echoes reverberated.

On his fourth heave, the leg bounced aside just far enough, but the bedpost snapped in two. Gordon barely escaped being impaled on the sharp, jagged stub as he fell onto the mattress. The canopy followed him and the aged bed collapsed in a noisy crash.

Gordon cursed as he fought with the canopy. Then he sneezed violently. The cloud of floating dust made it almost impossible to breathe.

Regaining a bit of sense, Gordon slithered from under the canopy and stumbled out of the room in a fit of sneezing.

The attack subsided slowly. As he stood gripping the upstairs bannister, he heard a distant murmur that sounded something like,"I think I heard it over this way . . . "

Gordon shook his head vigorously. Then wiping his eyes, he reentered the bedroom. The trapdoor was exposed. Gordon had

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to pry for a few moments before the edge would come up. Finally, the secret panel rose with a high, rusty skreel. Cobwebs greeted Gordon. Simultaneously, he heard a commotion outside. Now the voices could not be denied.

He quickly brushed the webs aside with his bow and peered into the hole.

There was a large metal box inside. Gordon reached in and almost strained his back hauling it out onto the floor. The hinges and hasp were rusted. A stainless steel lock bound the chest shut. Gordon looked back into the hole. The things a prewar doctor might have kept in a locked chest would be of less use than the canned goods and trade items he might have merely hidden in a spree of hoarding.

But there was nothing but the box. Gordon lifted the haft of his knife to smash the small lock. The chest might still hold weapons and ammunition.

He stopped. The voices were perilously close now.

"I think it came from this house!" A man's voice called out. There were footsteps on the wooden porch. More feet shuffled through the dry leaves on the large, overgrown lawn.

Gordon sheathed the knife and snatched up his gear. He hurried out of the room to the stairwell. This was not the best of circumstances to meet other men. In Boise and other mountain ruins there had been almost a code. Gleaners from ranches all around could try their luck in the open city, and though the groups and individuals were wary, they seldom preyed on one another.

In other places, though, territoriality was the rule. Gordon might be searching in some clan's turf. In any case, a quick departure was definitely in order.

Boots walked noisily downstairs. Going down would be useless, and it was too late to close the trap door or hide the heavy box. Gordon turned as quietly as he could to the narrow attic ladder. He climbed up into one end of the A-framed, gabled garret. He had searched among the useless mementos here earlier. Now he looked for a hiding place for himself.

Gordon walked, stooped over, near the sloping walls to avoid creaks in the floorboards. He chose a large trunk near a small gable window and laid his sack and quiver upon it. Quickly, he strung his bow, then settled behind the trunk.

Would they search? If they did, the strongbox would certainly attract attention! If so, would they take it as an offering and leave him a share of whatever it contained? He had known such things

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to happen in places where a primitive sort of honor system had developed.

He had the drop on anyone searching the attic. Gordon had mixed feelings about that. He would much rather take a hostage than a corpse, for numerous reasons, not the least of which was the fact that he was cornered in a wooden building, and the vengeful survivors of an ambush undoubtedly would have retained, even in the middle of a dark age, the craft of firemaking.

At least three pairs of booted feet could be heard now. In a rapid, hollow echo, one after another took the first stairs. When everyone was on the second floor, Gordon heard voices.

"Hey! Bob! Looka this!"

"What? You catch a couple of the kids playing doctor in an old bed ag . . . sheeit!"

There was a loud thump, followed by the hammering of metal on metal. A creak told Gordon that the strongbox had been opened.

"Sheeit!"

There were shuffling sounds and muttered conversation. Then, "Sure was nice of that fellow," the first voice spoke. Wish we could thank him. Ought to get to know him so we don't shoot first if we ever see him."

If that was bait, Gordon wasn't biting. He waited.

"Well, he at least deserves a warning," a third voice said, louder. "We got a shoot-first rule in Oakridge. He better scat before someone puts a hole in him bigger than the gap between a Survivalist's ears."

The footsteps echoed down the stairwell, and out onto the wooden porch.

Gordon laid down the bow and snatched up his pistol. He crawled to the gable that overlooked the front entrance. Three men walked away from the house. They carried rifles and wore canvas day packs. They walked with several yards between them, in a stalker's pattern, then disappeared into the woods.

Gordon hurried to the other windows. He saw no other motion.

He thought he had heard three pairs of feet earlier. It wasn't likely only one man would stay in ambush. Still, Gordon moved carefully. He lay down beside the trapdoor to the attic, his bow, bag, and quiver next to him. He crawled until his head and shoulders extended out over the opening, slightly above the level of the floor.

He pulled the revolver, held it out in front of him, and allowed gravity to take his head and torso into a sudden downward arc.

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His head and his pistol popped through the second-floor ceiling in a fashion an ambusher would be unlikely to expect. As the blood rushed to his head, Gordon was primed to snap off six quick shots at anything that moved.

Nothing moved.

He reached for his canvas bag, never taking his gaze or the pistol bearing from the hallway.

Gordon dropped the bag. If sound was the cue, that should bring an ambusher's head into view.

It didn't.

He dropped the bow and quiver more gently. Then he dropped his feet through the door to land in a crouch. Still nothing moved.

Gordon gathered his gear, made it travel-ready, then began a skirmish exit, examining each potential ambush site.

In the bedroom, the strongbox was empty. Beside it was a scatter of papers.

As he had expected, there were such curiosities as stock certificates, a stamp collection, and the deed to this house. But some of the other trash turned out to be recently torn cardpaper boxes.

The largest box, from which the celophane had been recently removed, had, until a few minutes before, held an AR-15 collapsible survival rifle. Gordon looked at the lightweight weapon pictured on the box and stifled a strangled cry of agony. Undoubtedly there had also been boxes of ammo.

But the other trash almost drove him wild. Labels were strewn about, saying empirin with codeine, eurythromycin, megavitamin complex, morphine . . .

Carefully handled . . . cached and traded in dribbles . . . these could have bought Gordon admission to any hamlet he chose. He might have won his way into one of the rich Wyoming ranch communities! He remembered a good doctor, in what was left of Butte, whose clinic was a sanctuary, protected by all the surrounding villages and clans. What the sainted gentleman could have done with these!

It was all right, he told himself over and over. He was alive. And if he could get back to his backpack, he would probably *stay* alive.

Gordon peeked out of the room, then resumed his stalking progress toward an exit from the house of false expectations.

A man who spends a long time alone in the wilderness can have one great advantage over a very good hunter who goes home to friends and companions each night.

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Gordon sensed something before he could identify it. At first he shrugged his unease off as a remnant of his fear and anger in the house. Then he realized that the forest sounded different somehow.

Gordon had been retracing his steps toward the eastern edge of town, where he had hidden his gear. Now he stopped and considered: this route would help him find his landmarks, but might it not give an antagonist who had found his previous trail an advantage?

Was he overreacting? He was no Jeremiah Johnson, who could read the sounds of the woods like the street signs of a city. He looked around for something to back up his unease. Activity around him had been sparse until he had stopped moving. But when he kept still, an avian ebb and flow slowly returned to this patch of forest. Camp robber birds flitted in coveys from spot to spot, playing guerrilla war with jays for the best of the tiny bug-infested glades. Smaller birds hopped from branch to branch, chirping. Birds in this size range had no great love of man, but they didn't go to great lengths to avoid him if he was quiet.

Then what?

There was a snapping sound to his left, near one of the ubiquitous blackberry thickets. But there, too, there were birds, or rather a bird. A mockingbird. The creature swooped up through the branches and landed in a bundle of twigs Gordon guessed to be its nest. It stood there, like a small lordling, haughty and proud. It squawked once, then dove toward the thicket again. As it passed out of sight, there was another tiny rustle; then the mockingbird swooped into view again.

Gordon froze an expression of nonchalance onto his face and idly picked at the loam with his bow. Meanwhile, he loosened the loop on his revolver. It took an effort to keep from displaying his nervousness.

He began moving diagonally to the thicket, about twenty yards away, moving neither toward it nor away from it, but in the direction of a large Ponderosa pine. The hackles on his neck were as far up as a furless ape could lift them.

Something behind that thicket had stimulated the nest defense response of the mockingbird. Whatever it was behaved most unanimal like, trying to ignore the nuisance attacks—to stay hidden.

Alerted, Gordon recognized a hunting blind.

He slung the bow over his shoulder with exaggerated carelessness, but as he passed behind the pine, he drew his revolver and

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ran into the forest at a sharp angle, trying to keep the bulk of the tree between himself and the thicket.

He remained in the tree's umbra only a moment. Surprise protected him a moment longer. Then the cracking of three loud shots, all of different caliber, diffracted down the lattice of trees.

Gordon lengthened his stride. There was a fallen log ahead, at the top of a small rise. It would not only provide shelter if he could reach it; it would also conceal his movements. He heard three more bangs as he dove over the decaying trunk. He hit the ground and felt a stabbing pain in his right arm.

Gordon felt a moment's blind panic as the hand holding his revolver cramped. If he had broken his arm . . . Blood soaked the cuff of his US Government Issue tunic. The pain was exaggerated by his imagination as he pulled back on the sleeve. The wound was a shallow gash. Small slivers of wood hung from the laceration. His bow had broken and stabbed him as he had fallen upon it.

His ears picked up sounds of pursuit. Whoops of gleeful chase carried over the tiny hillock.

Gordon threw the bow aside; later he would have time to curse its loss. He hurried uphill and to the right, crouching to take advantage of the creekbed and underbrush. Hunted men often run downstream. Gordon raced upslope, hoping that one of his enemies knew that bit of trivia.

There were shouts behind him. For a few minutes sounds of pursuit came closer. Gordon's own racket seemed loud enough to wake sleeping bears. Twice, he caught his breath behind boulders or clumps of foliage.

Finally the shouts became diminished with distance. Gordon sighed as he settled back against a large oak and waited. When the noises had receded far enough, he pulled the aid kit from his belt pouch.

His arm would be all right. There was no reason to expect infection from the polished wood of the bow. The tear was far from vessels or tendons. It hurt like hell, though. He bound it, then looked around to get his bearings.

To his surprise, he recognized two landmarks at once . . . the shattered sign of the Oakridge Motel, seen over the treetops, and a cattle grate across a worn asphalt path just to the east.

Gordon moved to the place where he had left his goods. The stuff was exactly as he had left it. Apparently the Fates were not so cruel as to deal him another blow just yet. He knew they didn't

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operate that way. They always let you hope, for a while, before They let you have it.

It was hard to believe they had missed him. They'd had the drop on him. Were they *so* surprised by his sudden break for it? Gordon wondered. They must have had semi-automatic weapons, yet he remembered only six shots.

At first he thought there were no bullet wounds on the Ponderosa pine, across the clearing. Then he looked a bit higher. Two fresh scars blemished the bark ten feet up.

So. They had not meant to kill him at all. They had aimed high to scare him off.

Gordon's lips curled. Ironically, this made his assailants easier to hate. Unthinking malice he had come to accept, from many former Americans, as he accepted foul weather. But calculated contempt he had to take personally. These men understood the concept of mercy, but they had robbed, injured, and terrorized him.

He picked up their trail a few hundred yards to the west. It was clear and uncovered. They were almost arrogant. Gordon took no chances, however. It was almost dusk before he reached the palisade that surrounded New Oakridge.

It was apparently the most prosperous community he had found since leaving Idaho. An enclosure that had once been a city park was enclosed by a high, wooden fence. From within, Gordon heard the lowing of numerous cattle. A horse whinnied. Gordon could small hay and the rich scent of livestock.

Nearby, a still higher wall surrounded three blocks of what had been the southwest corner of Oakridge town. A row of two-storey buildings a half-block long took up the center of the village. Gordon could see the tops of these, including a water tower with a crow's nest atop it. There was motion in the crow's nest. A guard stood watch.

There was no entrance on this side. He skirted around to the south.

The forest had been cut, years ago, to provide a free fire zone around the village wall. Less care had apparently been taken of late. Undergrowth half as high as a man had encroached on the open area. Gordon crouched when he heard voices; then cautiously he approached from behind a curtain of trees.

A large gate swung open as Gordon reached the south wall. As he settled down to watch, two armed men sauntered out, looked around, then waved to someone within.

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With a shout and a snap of reins a wagon pulled by two draft horses sallied throught the gate. The driver paused by the two guards. Gordon could barely make out what he said.

"Tell the Mayor we appreciate the loan, Jeff. I know I'm in the hole pretty deep. But we'll pay him back out of the harvest, for sure. He already owns a piece of the farm, so this seed ought to be a good investment for him."

One of the guards nodded. "Sure thing, Sonny. Now you be careful on your way out, okay? Some of the boys spotted a loner down at the east end of old town today. There was some shootin'."

The farmer gasped. "Was anyone hurt? Are you sure it was a loner?"

"Yeah, pretty sure. He ran like a rabbit, according to Bob."

Gordon's heart beat faster. The insults had reached a point almost beyond bearing.

"The fellow did the Mayor a real favor, though," the guard went on. "Found a hidey hole full of drugs before Bob's guys drove him off. Mayor's going to pass some of them around to some of the owners at a party tonight, to find out what they'll do. I sure wish I moved in those circles."

"Me too!" the younger guard agreed. Hey, Sonny, you think the Mayor might pay you some of your bonus in drugs if you make quota this year? You could have a real party!"

Sonny smiled sheepishly and shrugged. Then, for some reason, his head drooped. The older guard looked at him quizzically.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Sonny shook his head. "We don't wish for very much anymore, do we, Jeff?"

Jeff frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean as long as we're wishing to be cronies of the Mayor, why don't we wish we had a Mayor without cronies at all!"

"I . . . "

"Hell, if pigs had wings! Jeff, remember when we used to talk about the old days? Remember when we dreamed that things could be decent again? Remember when we wished—"

The farmer's voice choked.

Jeff put his hand on the farmer's arm. Sonny nodded acknowledgement, then said, "Yaah!" and snapped the reins. The wagon rolled down the road.

Jeff looked after the wagon for a long moment and chewed on a grass stem. Then he turned to his younger companion.

"Jimmy, did I ever tell you about Portland? Sonny and I used to go there, before the war. We used to . . . "

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They passed through the gate, out of Gordon's hearing.

Under other circumstances Gordon might have pondered for hours the information that one small conversation had offered, about the psychology and social structure of Oakridge and its environs. But right now he was too angry. His outrage over the "rabbit" remark met his indignation over the proposed use of the drugs he had found and made him think purple thoughts. He remembered the doctor in Wyoming and thought of the benefit he might make of the drugs. Why, most of the substances wouldn't even make these ignorant savages high!

He imagined himself scaling the walls, finding the storage facilities, and reclaiming his discoveries, along with some added items to make up for the insults, his wound, and his broken bow.

The image wasn't satisfying enough. Gordon embellished. He envisioned dropping in on the Mayor's party and wasting all of the power-hungry cronies who were making a midget empire out of this corner of the dark age. He imagined acquiring power, power to do good . . . power to *force* these yokels to use the education of their younger days, before the educated generation disappeared forever from the world.

Gordon considered his options. Leaving was out of the question. He recognized that his pride would not allow him to go. He would do battle, and that was that. Unfortunately, he was less sure about *how* he would do battle. Gordon stood up and scratched his head, dislodging his cap. He caught it before it fell. He was about to put it back on when he stopped and looked at it. Slowly, he smiled. A plan began to form. It would be audacious, but it had an element of consistency that appealed to Gordon. He supposed he was the last man alive who had the temperament to choose a course of deadly danger for aesthetic reasons. If his scheme failed, it would still be spectacular.

The plan would require a brief foray into the ruins of old Oakridge—to one of the buildings certain to be among the least looted. He would have to be careful not to be spotted during the remaining daylight.

Two hours later, Gordon stepped along the road in the dusk. He had retraced his steps from town until he came to the road Sonny had used, south of the village wall. Now he approached the gate boldly.

The guard was lax. Gordon came to within thirty feet unchal-

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lenged. He saw a sentry near the far end of the palisade, but the idiot was looking the other way.

Gordon placed Abby's whistle between his lips and blew, hard, three times. The shrill cry echoed among the buildings and trees all around.

Hurried footsteps pounded along the parapet. Three men carrying shotguns appeared above the gate to look down upon him in the gathering twilight.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" one voice called out. "We don't welcome strangers here!"

"I must speak with someone in authority," Gordon hailed. "This is official business, and I demand entry to the town of Oakridge!"

There was a long silence. The guards whispered among themselves, and one man hurried off.

"Come again?" The chief guard shouted. "I don't think I heard you properly. Are you feverish? Have you got the Sickness?"

"I am not ill. I am tired and hungry and angry at being shot at. But all of that can wait until I have done my duty here."

"Duty? What the devil are you talking about?"

Footsteps echoed on the parapet. Several more men arrived; then a number of children and women began to string out to the left and right. Apparently, discipline had become lax in Oakridge.

Gordon repeated himself. Slowly and firmly he reiterated his demand to be allowed entry.

A group of figures carrying lanterns appeared on the parapet to the right. Those on that side made way.

"Look, loner," The chief guard said, "you're just asking for a bullet. We have no 'official business' with anyone outside this valley since we broke relations with that commie place down at Blakeville. And I'm not bothering the Mayor for some crazy—"

He turned in surprise as the party of dignitaries reached the gate. A new voice spoke.

"I was just nearby. Heard the commotion. What's going on here?"

"Fellow claims he has official business here, but he's not from the valley. They all wear those hat things.

"He must be sick, or else he's one of those crazies that always used to come through. I thought they'd all be dead by now."

Gordon waited. In the growing darkness he saw the leading dignitary lean over the parapet to look at him.

"I am the Mayor of Oakridge," the man announced. "We don't believe in charity here, but if you're that fellow who found the goodies this afternoon and graciously donated them to my boys,

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I'll admit we owe you. I'll have a nice hot meal lowered over the gate. You can sleep there by the road. Tomorrow, though, you gotta be gone. We don't want disease here. And from what I hear, you must be delirious."

Gordon smiled. It would be a pleasure to bluff this jerk. It wouldn't feel like lying at all.

"Your generousity astounds me, Mr. Mayor, but I have come too far on official business to turn away now. First, though, can you tell me if Oakridge has a wireless facility?"

The silence brought on by his non sequitur was long and heavy. Gordon could imagine the Mayor's puzzlement. Finally, perhaps out of curiosity, the town boss answered.

"We haven't had a working radio in ten years. Why? What has that to do with anything—"

"That's a shame. I'd hoped you had a transmitter. The airwaves have been a shambles since the war, of course—all the radioactivity—but I'd hoped I could report back to my superiors."

He delivered the lines with aplomb. This time they caused not silence but a buzz of conversation that ran up and down the parapet. Most of the population of Oakridge must be up there by now. Gordon hoped the wall was well built.

"Get that lantern over here!" the Mayor commanded. "No, you idiot! The one with the reflector! Yes! Now shine it on that man! I want a look at him!"

The light speared out at Gordon, but he was expecting it. He didn't cover his eyes, or squint. He turned to bring his "costume" to the best angle. The cap, with its polished crest, lay at a rakish angle on his head.

He shifted the leather bag. The muttering of the crowd grew.

"Mr. Mayor," he called. "My patience is wearing thin. Please don't make me invoke my authority. I already will have to have words with you about the behavior of your 'boys' this afternoon. You are on the verge of losing your privilege of communication with the rest of the nation."

"Communication? Nation? What the are you talking about? There's just the Blakeville commies and savages beyond them! Who the hell are you!"

Gordon touched his cap. "Gordon Krantz, of the United States Postal Service. I am the courier assigned to reestablish a mail route in lower Oregon and general federal inspector for the region."

Gordon hadn't thought of the last part until it was out. Was it

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inspiration? Or a dare? Well, he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a goat.

The crowd became noisy. Several times Gordon heard the words, *outside*, and *inspector*, and especially *mailman*.

The Mayor shouted for silence. He was obeyed grudgingly and slowly. He shouted again. Finally he got order.

"So you're a mailman?" he called down to Gordon sarcastically. "What kind of idiots do you take us for, Krantz? A shiny suit makes you a government official? What government? What proof can you give us? Show us you're not a wild lunatic with radiation fever!"

Gordon pulled out the papers he had prepared only an hour before, using the seal stamp he had found in the ruins of the Oakridge Post Office.

"I have my credentials here," He offered. But he was interrupted.

"We're not letting you come close enough to give any of these people your fever!" The Mayor shouted. There's no government but what we have right here! You're lucky this isn't like the plague years, and we're willing to let you go without a cremation, to cure you of your bug!"

Rats! If they wouldn't even look at the "credentials" he had forged, the trip into oldtown this afternoon had been wasted. Gordon was down to his last ace. He smiled for the crowd.

He reached into his side pocket and pulled out a small bundle. He made a pretense of shuffling through the items he held and squinting at the labels, but he actually knew the names by heart.

"Is there a Donald Smith here?" he called.

The muttering crowd grew louder. Finally a voice called out, not without an awed tone.

"He died a year after the war, in the last battle of the warehouse!"

Gordon was pleased at the tremor in the speaker's voice. Surprise was not the only emotion at work here. Still, he needed something a lot better.

"Oh, well," he called. "I'll have to confirm that, of course." Before the Mayor could speak, he hurried on.

"Is there either a Mr. or Mrs. Franklin Thompson, in town? Or their son or daughter?"

Now a tide of hushed whispering carried almost a note of superstition. A woman replied.

"Dead! The boy lived until last year. Worked on the Jascowisc stead. His folks were in Portland when it blew."

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Damn! Gordon had only one name left. It was all very well to strike their hearts with his knowledge, but what he really needed was somebody alive!

"Right!" he called. "We'll confirm that. Finally, is there a Grace Horton here?"

"No, there ain't no Grace Horton here!" the Mayor shouted sarcastically. "I know everyone in my territory. Never been no Grace Horton in the ten years since I arrived! You imposter! Can't you all see what he did? He found an old telephone book in town and copied down some names! Buddy, I rule that you are disturbing the peace! You've got five seconds to be gone before I order my men to fire!"

Gordon had no choice. At least he could beat a retreat and nothing would be lost but his pride.

But his body would not turn. His feet would not move. His will to run away had evaporated. Straightening his shoulders, he called the Mayor's bluff.

"Assault on a postal courier is one of the few federal crimes that the pro tem Congress has not suspended for the Recovery Period, Mr. Mayor. The United States has always protected its mailmen."

He looked coldly into the glare. "Always," he emphasized. And for a moment he felt a thrill He *was* a courier, at least in spirit. He was an anachronism that the dark age had somehow missed when it systematically went about rubbing idealism from the world. Gordon looked straight toward the dark silhouette of the Mayor and silently dared him to shoot.

For several seconds the silence gathered. Then the Mayor began to count.

"One!"

He counted slowly, apparently having made up his mind to go for sadistic effect.

"Two!"

The bluff was certainly lost. Gordon knew he should leave now, at once. Still, his body would not turn.

"Three!"

This is the way the last idealist dies, he thought. The sixteen years of survival were an accident about to be corrected. Hard-won pragmatism had finally given way to . . . to a gesture.

There was movement on the parapet. Someone at the far left was struggling forward.

"Four!"

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The guards raised their shotguns. Gordon thought he saw a few of them move reluctantly. Not that it would do him any good.

The Mayor stretched out the last count, perhaps a bit unnerved by Gordon's stubbornness. Then Gordon saw a shadowy figure raise a hand.

"Excuse me, Mr. Mayor!" a woman's tremulous voice cut in. Her timidity made her words almost inaudible.

"What?" The Mayor's shadow did not turn from Gordon.

"I . . . I'm Grace Horton," the woman said softly.

"What?!" He repeated himself.

"It's my maiden name. I was married the year after the second famine. That was before you and your men arrived . . . "

Gordon sighed. He held up the bundle in his hand and touched his cap with his other.

"Good evening, then, Mizz Horton. Lovely evening, no? Oh by the way, I have a letter here for you, from a Mr. Jim Horton, of Pine View. He gave me this letter twelve days ago . . . "

The people in the crowd all seemed to be talking at once. There were sudden movements and shouts. Gordon had to raise his voice to be heard.

" . . . Yes, Ma'am. He seemed to be quite well. I'm afraid that's all I have on this trip. But I'll carry your reply to your brother on my way back. One thing, though. Mr. Horton didn't have enough postage, back in Pine View, so I'm going to have to ask you for ten dollars C.O.D."

The crowd roared. The figure of the Mayor turned left and right, shouting, but nothing he said was heard.

Suddenly the gate swung open and people poured out into the night. They surrounded Gordon. He carefully maintained his composure and walked slowly toward the opening. He smiled and nodded to everyone, especially those who reached out to touch his elbow or the wide curve of his bulging leather bag.

The youngsters looked at him in superstitious awe. On many of the older faces, tears streamed.

Gordon was in the middle of a trembling reaction. He felt a little ashamed, but he struggled to maintain the dignified pose, and told himself, "The hell with it. It's not my fault they want to believe in Santa Claus! I only want what belongs to me! Simpletons."

But he smiled all around as the hands touched and love washed over him. It flowed about him like a rushing stream and carried him, in a wave of desperate, unwonted hope, into the town of Oakridge. ●

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LETTERS

Dear *IAsfm:*

As a letter carrier and a recent reader of your publication, I found the story in your April issue, "Up, Up and Away," by Hugh Brous, most enjoyable. Many are the times, as I trudge along in the snow and ice, that I too wish there were instances where I could fly or perform some sort of levitation. Preferably with the mail itself. Then to imagine a being with such an ability wishing to walk did cause a good bit of laughter among my fellow workers. Mr. Brous had the portrayal of the flier's superior down pat. In the short introduction on the author there is no mention of his ever being in the Postal Service. Was he ever a letter carrier?

Gilbert J. Strong Jr.
Maplewood, NJ

As far as I know, the author is not a letter-carrier. But I am delighted to hear from one. I view them with awe and love. Something like 90 percent of my income is handed to me by a letter carrier, and if that doesn't induce affection, what would? —*Isaac Asimov*

David Brin has strong feelings about letter carriers too. Be sure to read "The Postman," page 120.

—*Ed.*

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In regard to your editorial in the April, 1982 issue on telepathy: You stated that it seemed to you that there was great "survival value" for a human being having telepathy. Human history would tend to refute that. All through our history members of society, at every level of cultural development, have been persecuted for being different. Witch-hunts, stoning, being burned at the stake, inquisitions—all of these activities would have made those with any sixth-sense ability either very shy or very scarce. Even today those who "hear voices" are regarded as being mentally disturbed in some way, rather than being telepathic. Instead of being an aid to survival, exhibiting telepathic talent would have been asking for persecution and probably death. A "witch" would find it somewhat difficult to find others to mate with (not many would want to invite attention from the authorities for openly or even secretly associating with a dabbler in black magic) and to produce all those superior children, who would also be hunted and often executed for showing any strange abilities. Therefore, I do not find it the least bit puzzling that research into ESP is a recent development or that there are so few people being found with any talent in that area. I am just surprised that there were those with sixth-sense abilities who survived the ignorance of the past long

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enough to pass along some of their talent.

Lisa Yellis
2 Terrace Circle
'Apt. 1-H
Great Neck, N.Y. 11021

Oh, I don't know. Witch-hunting was a relatively brief and localized aberration. In most places and at most times, people who appear to have special abilities to control the Universe are highly regarded.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IAsfm:*

Who on earth (or wherever) perpetrated, and why on earth are you perpetuating the outrage which (dis)graces the Editorial column? I refer to the photograph which somebody seems to think is a representation of the Good Doctor. Come, come. All Faithful Readers know he's handsomer than that. He *tells* us so frequently enough, and who are we to dispute this firsthand knowledge?

Of course, he *might* be mildly prejudiced—and *is* noted as an author of fiction. But, speaking as one of those fortunate enough to have actually seen/conversed with the Adorable Asimov, I wish to go on record with the opinion that that @#$@!!! caricaturist has committed treachery most foul. I have seen the Attractive Dr. A. in several moods, from charmingly urbane to painstakingly tolerant to defensively indignant.

Never, however, have I seen him (or heard reports thereof) in the attitude of glumph.

Is that (pot)shot supposed to make him look worldweary, cynical and (thus) authoritative? Perhaps the intention is to make him look so tough and mean nobody will argue with his pronouncements. Is it merely corroborative detail intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative? Unnecessary. When has anybody ever accused him of being bald?

Please, put back that twinkle. Give back that boyish grin. Fan again the fluttering flames in female hearts. In other words, DO SOMETHING!

Yours,

Tracy Anne Morgan
New York, NY

Perhaps the photograph is through the wily maneuvers of my dear Janet, who, knowing the effect of my boyish grin on susceptible females of all ages and persuasion, and unwilling to lose me to hordes of maddened women, arranges these subtle devices.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have just re-read your February editorial on bad writing. While I agree with your comments on writing, I think you are being unfair to the individuals afflicted with the disease. That is how they are taught and to some extent required to write. I have never seen an editor of a journal (or in government, where I now work) object to the six faults you mention (except obscurity.) However, I have seen numerous objections to short words and sentences, putting the subject first, and active voice. Although I can appreciate the emo-

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tion that went into your editorial, you could have been more charitable in apportioning blame.

Fred R. Sinal
Hampton, VA

You make a good point. And I must admit that I am enough of a writer to be perfectly willing to blame everything on editors, always excepting Kathleen and Shawna.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have just finished reading your magazine. I thought it was great so I called a few friends and told them to rush out and get a copy, quick. They told me they already had theirs, and that they have been reading your magazine for ages! Well, I could not believe this; they shoved a couple of your earlier copies in my face and shut me up real fast. "Some friends!" I screamed. "You've been reading this fine magazine all this time while I've been listening to Frank Sinatra records! For shame, for shame." I'm still listening to my Frank Sinatra records.

But back to your magazine. I can't say enough about it. You have fine talent in there. Somtow Sucharitkul's "Aquila the God" in your April issue was superb. I hope to be seeing more of his work in your magazine.

Before I go, I have one question for you, doctor. Have you ever considered being a veterinarian? Ever since my cat (a red she-cat—I don't know what kind, though) got a hold of your editorial, she will not let it go. Maybe its your straightforward way of telling it like it is. Maybe it's your handsome photograph. Maybe you just have a way with cats.

Philip Lopez, Jr.
St. Bernard, LA

I am a cat-lover myself, but I am as nothing as compared with my beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde-haired daughter. She owns two cats and says that if she ever has a child, she won't care if it's male or female, as long as it's a kitten.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IAsfm:*

I write to complain of the arrogance of amateur critics.

In one of your recent issues, a reader and psychologist took issue with J. O. Jeppson's fine "Pshrink" series. The reader objected to the stories' humor, on the grounds that we laymen would never understand it. That was nonsense; anyone objecting to stretching his mind would not buy this magazine . . . and I, personally, object to an arbitrary limit being set for my intelligence. As the Oldest Member said, "You cut that out!"

Another objector to humor—he calls it "frivolousness"—surfaced in your April '82 magazine. The best reply to his complaint came in the same issue: Somtow Sucharitkul's "Aquila the God." Our critic should have suspended judgment for one more month; Mr. Sucharitkul's wacky brilliance is a treat for a jaded lector.

It is a pity that frivolity is foreign to some of my fellow readers. Please, gentle editors, give them

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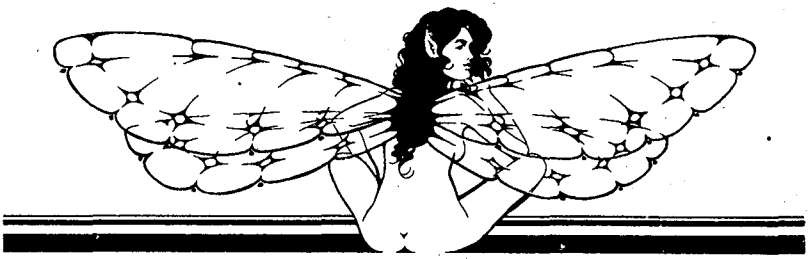
plenty of occasions to better their opinions!

Amy Huber
Farragut, TN

I agree. Readers are not to be underestimated, certainly not readers of science fiction magazines. If they did not enjoy having their minds stretched, they would be reading something else (and, unavoidably, something inferior).

—Isaac Asimov



MARTIN GARDNER (From Page 103).

THIRD SOLUTION TO AND HE BUILT ANOTHER CROOKED HOUSE

The answer is no. Consider any edge on the interior cube. Four different faces touch along that edge; therefore four colors are required.

Maybe you can think of some other good puzzles based on the shape of Teal's house. If so, send them to me in care of this magazine. And if you never read Heinlein's 1940 story "—And He Built a Crooked House," you'll find it in Clifton Fadiman's *Fantasia Mathematica* and in many other anthologies.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The WorldCon has come and gone, but if you act fast, there's a chance to meet the Good Doctor in October. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. When calling, give your name and reason right away. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

OCTOBER, 1982

1-3—ArmadilloCon. For info, write: **Box 9612 NW Sta., Austin TX 78766.** Or phone **(512) 443-3491, 477-8218 or 474-2275** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Austin TX (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Geo. Alec Effinger, Ed Bryant, George R. R. ("Windhaven") Martin, Howard ("Ugly Chickens") Waldrop, Chad Oliver, Leigh Kennedy.

1-3—CoCon, Marriott Hotel, Stamford CT. I*S*A*A*C A*S*I*M*O*V. A relaxacon, centered on the pool.

8-9—RoVaCon, (703) 389-9400. Northside High School, Roanoke VA. Philip Klass (William Tenn), artist Kelly Freas, M. A. Foster, Rudy ("Software") Rucker, Ralph Roberts, Paul Dellinger, D. Chaffee, Phil & Sylvia Hawkins, Bob Simpson, the Prestons. Masquerade, cantina, workshops.

8-10—FandersonCon. Bloomsbury Centre Hotel, London UK. The eponymous G. Anderson, Ed Bishop, Gray.

8-10—StarCon, (806) 747-0669. Jack (Humanoids) Williamson, Bob Vardeman, G. Proctor, W. Norwood.

8-10—OctoCon. El Rancho Tropicana Hotel, Santa Rosa CA. Zelazny, McQuarrie, Niven, M. Z. Bradley, M. Randall, P. Anderson, C. Brown, T. Carr, E. Lynn, K. Sky, D. Gerrold, J. Hogan, Goldin, F. Nelson, Preuss, J. Stanley, M. Carroll, R. Dettling, D. Dixon, R. Lupoff, A. Austin, G. Barr.

8-10—VatiCon, (404) 523-0956. Rome GA. A relaxacon, as only the Southern fans know how to do it.

8-11—LastCon. Ramada Inn, Albany NY 12212. (518) 434-8217. Lee (Shree) Killough, fan Leslie Turek, W. A. (Bob) Tucker. Commemorating Man's 1st quarter century in space. Masquerade, banquet.

8-11—Project Starcast, Harrowgate Exhibition Center, Harrowgate, England. Multi-media event.

15-17—RocKon. Sam Peck Inn, Little Rock AR. C. J. (Faded Sun) Cherryh, M. Wallbank, J. Coulson.

15-17—PoconoCon. At the Frazetta Mansion, 53 Wash. St., E. Stroudsburg PA. Frazetta's art hoard.

22-23—AkroMiniCon, c/o McFadden, 660 Kling, Akron OH 44311. University of Akron. Masquerade.

22-24—MileHiCon, Box 27094, Denver CO 80227. (303) 233-6958. Ed Bryant, Kelly Freas, C. Willis.

29-31—World Fantasy Con, Box 8262, E. Hartford CT 06108. (203) 742-5417. Peter ("Ghost Story") Straub, Joseph Payne Brennan, Donald Maitz, Charles L. Grant. The WorldCon for fantasy fans.

29-31—NecronomiCon, Box 678, Thonotosassa FL 33592. (813) 677-2881. Tampa FL. Andrew J. Offutt (John Cleve), Marv Wolfman, Pat Broderick, Bob McLeod. Alien cooking, fan cabaret, buffet.

NOVEMBER, 1982

5-7—NovaCon, c/o Andromeda Bookshop, 84 Suffolk St., Birmingham, B1 1TA, England. Harry Harrison.

5-7—SciCon, c/o HRSFA, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670. Polly & Kelly Freas, Richard Pini. Masquerade.

SEPTEMBER, 1983

1-5—ConStellation, Box 1046, Baltimore, MD 21203. John (Zanzibar) Brunner, D. Kyle, Jack (Well of Souls) Chalker. The 1983 WorldCon. Go to smaller cons if you can to prepare for the WorldCons.

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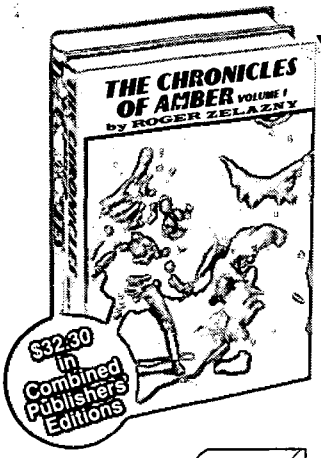

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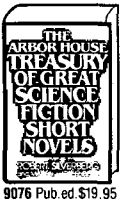

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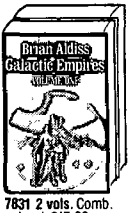

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If you don't want a Selection, prefer an Alternate, or no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided and return it to us by the date specified.

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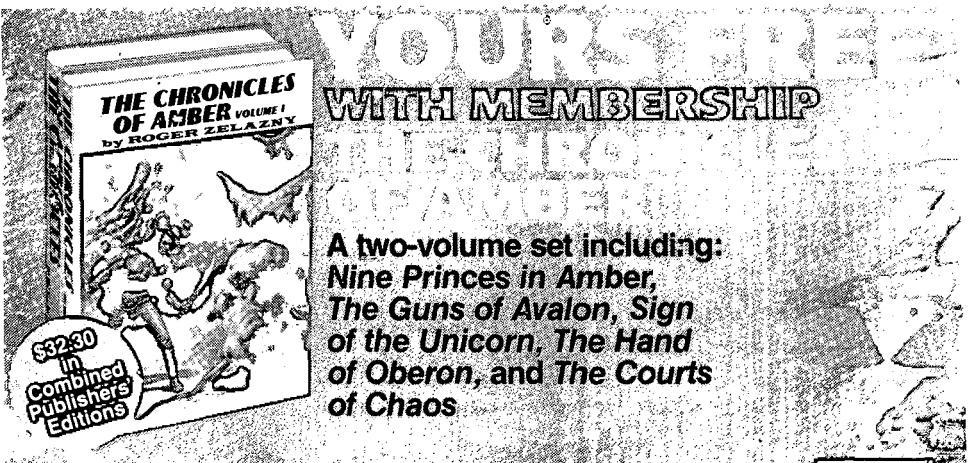

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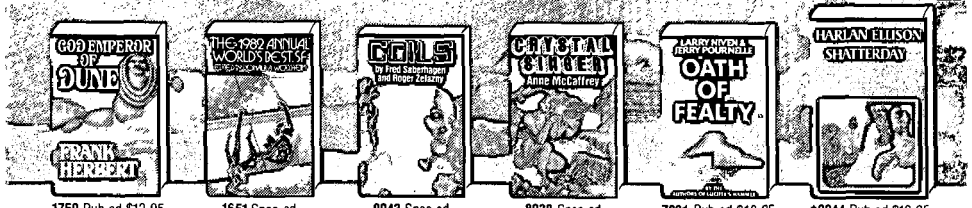

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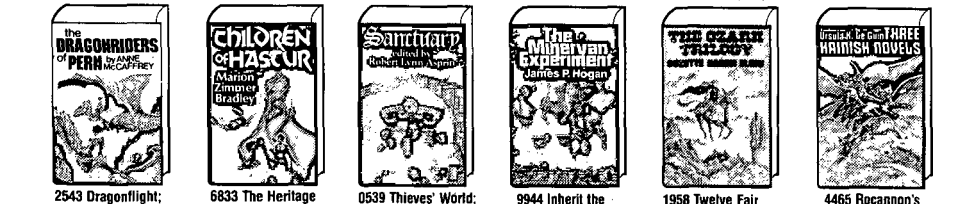

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